

The integration of national minorities in the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli provinces of Georgia

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The Integration of National Minorities in the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli provinces of Georgia

Five Years into the Presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili

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Introduction

This paper aims to explore the extent to which national minorities in the Georgian provinces of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti are integrated into the economic and political life of Georgia and to investigate how government policy in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution of November 2003 has affected the relationship between the state and minority communities in these two regions. It is divided into eight parts. First I provide a general overview of the main characteristics of the population of the two provinces in terms of ethnicity and language use. The second part turns to the economy of the two regions, focusing on both agricultural and industrial production. The next section turns to state-society relations by showing how government policy in the fields of education, local government, infrastructure and economic development has impacted upon the integration of national minorities in the two provinces. The fourth section explores in greater depth the modes of local governance in the two municipalities of Samtskhe-Javakheti (Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda, collectively known as Javakheti) and the five municipalities of Kvemo Kartli (Gardabani, Marneuli, Bolnisi, Dmanisi and Tsalka) in which members of national minorities are concentrated, by identifying the main power brokers in these municipalities and by looking at how local power structures have changed in the last five years. The following part focuses on the process of migration and includes both permanent migration of Georgians and members of national minorities within Georgia and to destinations beyond the country's borders, as well as seasonal migration abroad. The sixth part deals with the issue of land distribution, which has been a contentious one in both provinces. The seventh section is the final substantive part of the paper; it takes the “view from below” by looking at the most salient issues from the point of view of members of national minorities that live in the two provinces. The paper then closes with a short conclusion.

1. Demographic Overview

Table 1 Ethnic Composition of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti Provinces

PROVINCE/DISTRICT	Georgians	Azeris	Armenians	Greeks	Others
Kvemo Kartli	44.71%	45.14%	6.39%	1.49%	2.27%
Rustavi city	87.77%	4.29%	2.41%	0.22%	5.30%
Gardabani	53.20%	43.72%	0.93%	0.21%	1.95%
Marneuli	8.04%	83.10%	7.89%	0.33%	0.63%
Bolnisi	26.82%	65.98%	5.81%	0.59%	0.80%
Dmanisi	31.24%	66.76%	0.52%	0.78%	0.69%
Tetritskaro	74.03%	6.47%	10.38%	5.05%	4.07%
Tsalka	12.02%	9.54%	54.98%	21.97%	1.50%
Samtskhe-Javakheti	43.35%	0.03%	54.60%	0.36%	1.67%
Borjomi	84.21%	0.07%	9.64%	1.67%	4.42%
Akhaltzikhe	61.72%	0.03%	36.59%	0.28%	1.39%
Adigeni	95.70%	0.08%	3.36%	0.03%	0.82%
Aspindza	82.02%	0.00%	17.47%	0.06%	0.45%
Akhalkalaki	5.27%	0.00%	94.33%	0.08%	0.31%
Ninotsminda	1.39%	0.01%	95.78%	0.01%	2.81%

The two provinces of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli in southern and southeastern Georgia respectively are the only two of Georgia's nine provinces (*mkhareebi*) in which members of national minorities make up a majority of the population of the territory. According to the 2002 census, fifty-five percent of the total population of Georgia's minorities were concentrated in these two provinces if we exclude from our calculations

those territories of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in which the census could not be carried out. In Samtskhe-Javakheti, the main minority is the Armenian minority, which makes up more than 90% of the population of two districts, Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda (collectively known as Javakheti). In Kvemo Kartli, the principal minority is the Azeri minority; Azeris make up a majority of the population in Marneuli, Bolnisi and Dmanisi municipalities and over 40% of inhabitants in Gardabani municipality. There is also a large Armenian minority in Tsalka district (making up around 55% of the population) and a (fast disappearing) population of Greeks. The ethnic composition of all municipalities of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli, based on the population census of 2002, is shown in Table 1 above. The figure of 21.97% shown above for the Greek population of Tsalka municipality no longer represents reality. Most Greeks who were living in this municipality have since emigrated (mainly to Greece) and the true figure in 2009 is likely to be below five percent. Similarly, the percentage of Georgians living in Tsalka municipality is likely to be much higher (possibly as high as 40%) due to in-migration of Georgians from the mountainous districts of Adjara (especially Khulo) and from the mountainous northern region of Svaneti.

In terms of smaller minorities (subsumed under the category “others” in Table 1), the most significant are Russians, who make up 3.06% of the population of Rustavi city, 2.75% in Ninotsminda and 2.72% in Tetrtskaro. In Ninotsminda, most Russians are Dukhobors, religious dissidents who resettled to the area from Russia in the mid-nineteenth century (Lohm 2006). Finally, Ossetians make up 2.22% of the population in Borjomi district.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many members of national minorities remained poorly integrated in the social and political life of the new republic of Georgia due to their lack of knowledge of Georgian, which was now the only official language on Georgian territory (except in the autonomous republic of Abkhazia, where the Georgian constitution also grants Abkhaz the status of an official language). According to the 2002 census, only 31% of persons belonging to national minorities in Georgia are able to speak Georgian fluently.¹ Moreover, fluency in Georgian amongst minorities is concentrated in the capital city and other regions of the country where there is a mixed population, while fluency in more remote regions with monoethnic minority populations is far lower. A survey carried out

¹ Source: Sakartvelos Statistikis Sakhelmts'ipo Departamenti, Sakartvelos Mosakhleobis 2002 Ts'lis Pireveli Erovnuli Saqoveltao Aghts'eris Shedegebi.

by ECMI in May 2008 that included 1699 minority respondents from eight municipalities of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli showed that only in the municipalities of Borjomi and Akhaltsikhe, where the ethnic Georgian population is relatively high (see Table 1), were more than 10% of the minority population fully fluent in Georgian. The breakdown according to municipality is shown in Tables 2a and 2b (below).

Table 2a Fluency in Georgian amongst minorities in four districts of Samtskhe-Javakheti²

Level of Georgian	Borjomi	Akhaltsikhe	Akhalkalaki	Ninotsminda
No knowledge	0.0%	6.7%	47.2%	28.2%
Can only understand a few basic words	11.9%	28.9%	30.3%	52.6%
Can understand nearly everything but can express only basic needs verbally	4.8%	37.0%	16.5%	14.1%
Can understand and speak well but cannot write	11.9%	3.7%	0.8%	1.3%
Can understand, speak and write fluently	71.4%	23.7%	5.1%	3.8%

² Included 254 minority respondents sampled randomly from Akhalkalaki district, 156 from Ninotsminda district, 135 from Akhaltsikhe district and 42 from Borjomi district.

Table 2b Fluency in Georgian amongst minorities in four districts of Kvemo Kartli³

Level of Georgian	Gardabani	Marneuli	Dmanisi	Tsalka
No knowledge	24.5%	42.2%	8.1%	19.3%
Can only understand a few basic words	47.0%	35.1%	47.5%	49.5%
Can understand nearly everything but can express only basic needs verbally	14.0%	12.8%	32.3%	22.6%
Can understand and speak well but cannot write	6.9%	6.2%	7.1%	2.8%
Can understand, speak and write fluently	7.7%	3.8%	5.1%	5.7%

2. Economy

Increases in the economic output of both Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti have failed to keep up with the rapid growth of the economy in the capital city, Tbilisi. This is a reflection of a more general trend observed throughout most of the first decade of the twenty-first century in which an economic boom has occurred in the capital, but rural areas have failed to keep up. In 2007, annual turnover per capita in Kvemo Kartli stood at 59.7% of the national average, compared with 67.6% in 2003. In Samtskhe-Javakheti, the corresponding figures are 22.0% and 35.5%. A similar picture emerges when we consider production value per capita; this has fallen from 92.1% to 89.9% of the national average in the four years between 2003 and 2007 in Kvemo Kartli and from 47.9% to 25.7% in Samtskhe-Javakheti. If we rank eleven regions of Georgia (the nine rural provinces, the city of Tbilisi and the autonomous republic of Adjara) according to these two indicators, we see that Kvemo Kartli has maintained third place during the four-year period, behind Tbilisi and Adjara, while Samtskhe-Javakheti has held on to eighth place (above only Guria, Kakheti and Racha-Lechkhumi/Kvemo Svaneti, Department of Statistics 2008a). Given the fact that the overall income in Samtskhe-Javakheti is boosted by industrial enterprises such as Georgia Glass and Mineral Waters Company (see below) in predominantly Georgian areas of the province, we would expect that both turnover and production per capita in the predominantly Armenian

³ Included 422 minority respondents sampled randomly from Marneuli district, 379 from Gardabani district, 212 from Tsalka district and 99 from Dmanisi district.

districts of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda (collectively known as Javakheti) would be amongst the lowest in the country.

Both Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli are predominantly agricultural regions. Both are prime potato-growing areas and between them produce more than half of Georgia's potato crop. According to the State Department for Statistics, almost 110,000 tonnes of potatoes were produced in Samtskhe-Javakheti in 2007, which made up 37.4% of all potatoes produced in Georgia. In Kvemo Kartli, 60,000 tonnes were produced (20.5% of the total). Most of the potatoes are grown in highland areas of the two provinces, especially in Akhalkalaki, Ninotsminda, Aspindza, Dmanisi, Tetrtskaro and Tsalka districts. Other vegetables, such as tomatoes, cabbage, and cauliflower, as well as a wide range of fruits, grow in the lower lying areas of Kvemo Kartli, especially Gardabani and Marneuli districts. Vegetable production in Kvemo Kartli made up 79,500 tonnes in 2007, over 40% of the total vegetable production in Georgia (Department of Statistics 2008b). However, production of all vegetables, including potatoes has been falling throughout Georgia in recent years, reducing the overall income for both Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti. In addition to potatoes and other vegetables, maize and wheat are also grown in the lower-lying areas of Kvemo Kartli.

Livestock production also makes up a significant part of agricultural output in both Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti. Cattle and sheep breeding are widespread in both provinces, especially in highland regions of Kvemo Kartli, where hayfields make up a large part of agricultural land. Recently there has also been a very rapid rise in egg production in Kvemo Kartli; by 2007 Kvemo Kartli produced 57.5% of Georgia's eggs, compared with just 14.7% in 2003 (Department of Statistics 2008b).

Industrial production in both Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti is concentrated in a very few enterprises. In Kvemo Kartli, these are the Rustavi Steel Works, the Rustavi Chemical Plant (which produces chemical fertilisers), Heidelberg Cement in Rustavi and the Madneuli gold and copper mines at Kazreti in Bolnisi district. Following the privatization of these enterprises in 2005-2006, they increased their production significantly and together they account for most of Georgia's export capacity. By 2007, the output of industrial production per capita in Kvemo Kartli was more than double that of the national average. However, these enterprises proved highly vulnerable to vicissitudes in the world market and Rustavi

Steel was forced to suspend production in late 2008 and shed nearly a quarter of its staff as the world economic slowdown cut demand for Georgian steel. It is also worthy of note that with the exception of Madneuli, these enterprises are concentrated in Rustavi, where few members of national minorities live.

In Samtskhe-Javakheti, the main industrial enterprise is Georgia Glass and Mineral Waters Company, which produces Georgia's best known mineral waters. However, its location in Borjomi, where the vast majority of the population are ethnic Georgians (see Table 1), means that it provides little by way of employment for national minorities. There are very few enterprises in Javakheti, although a recent exception is the establishment of a garment factory in Ninotsminda by a local businessman who has spent several years in Russia (see below). Overall, in 2007 the output of industrial production per capita in Samtskhe-Javakheti was less than half of the national average.

3. State Society Relations: Government Policy towards Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli

During the leadership of Eduard Shevardnadze the Georgian state did not intervene directly in the everyday affairs of citizens in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti. However, individual state officials derived most of their income from corruption, which blighted the lives of those citizens that needed to make bureaucratic transactions in order to obtain a passport, start a business or obtain the paltry benefits (such as pensions) that the state provided. Moreover, the weak infrastructural power of the state during the Shevardnadze period meant that it was not possible to promote knowledge of the state language, Georgian, amongst members of national minorities. For this reason, knowledge of Georgian in areas in which minorities were geographically concentrated remained very poor. This impeded the creation of a “demos” to which all citizens, Georgian or otherwise, could feel they belonged. The language barrier increasingly became a barrier to communication between Georgian and minority groups, especially amongst young people, as Russian began to lose its role as the language of inter-ethnic communication. The youth—especially the Georgian youth—could no longer speak Russian fluently enough to communicate. Programmes to teach Georgian to ethnic minorities were half-hearted, mainly due to the state’s incapacity to implement its education policy. Declining infrastructure rendered communication even more complex, and poor provision of public goods further undermined prospects for integration. School buildings collapsed and some regions—especially Javakheti and Tsalka district—became

virtually cut off from the rest of the country as the parlous state of the roads made journeys to the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, arduous. In terms of the provision of public goods, regions in which minorities were concentrated were not necessarily worse off than other remote rural districts, but linguistic barriers reinforced a sense of isolation and neglect.

In Javakheti during the Shevardnadze period the Georgian state failed to provide public goods to the local population, but in many ways the 62nd Divisional Russian base located in the town of Akhalkalaki stepped in to fill this gap. This military base provided employment and a source of living to many local families. The presence of the base meant that the currency circulating in the region was the Russian ruble, rather than the Georgian lari (GEL), which further distanced Javakheti from the rest of Georgia. The base also provided psychological reassurance as a guarantee of defence against neighbouring Turkey.⁴ Plans by the Georgian government to close the base were therefore fiercely resisted by the local population.

In terms of how the state appointed officials to the local administration in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti, significant differences existed between the two regions. The key post at the level of the province was (and still is) that of governor, appointed by the president and occupied by an individual with close links to him. All provincial governors were (and still are) ethnic Georgians. However, differences arose at district (*rayon*) level⁵, where the key posts of district administrator (*gamgebeli*), chief of the district police, prosecutor, head of the district tax inspectorate and chief of the district education board were all appointed by the centre. In the two districts of Javakheti (Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda), where Armenians made up a majority, all these posts were held by Armenians who had been co-opted by the centre. Typically, the most influential individuals in these two districts were Armenian businessmen who had profited from Georgia's status as a "neutral" state in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to engage in the trade of oil and gas between Azerbaijan and Armenia (Wheatley 2004). However, these leaders could not be seen as representatives of their populations as they tended to pursue private (financial) goals, rather than serve the interests of the communities they supposedly represented.

In Kvemo Kartli, on the other hand, the Azeri population was barely represented in state

⁴ The Armenian population of Javakheti frequently refer to what they term the Armenian genocide, i.e. the large scale massacre of Armenians by Turkish Ottoman troops during the First World War.

⁵ After the new Organic Law on Georgia on Local Self-Government was adopted in December 2005, districts (*rayoni*) were referred to as municipalities.

structures at all. In the late 1980s, most Azeris holding top positions in local power structures were removed from their posts as a result of the new mood of ethnic nationalism that had swept the country. During Shevardnadze's term as president (1995–2003), all district *gamgeblebi* in Kvemo Kartli were Georgians (unlike in Javakheti, where these posts were held by Armenians) and virtually all other senior posts at *rayon* level were also held by Georgians. Local Azeri leaders were given minor posts but, more importantly, were allowed to engage in corruption in return for their loyalty to Kvemo Kartli's powerful governor, Levan Mamaladze. As a result, there were few mechanisms for the local Azeri population to express their grievances, the most pressing of which was corruption in the process of land distribution following the dissolution of the communist-era collective farms (*sovkhoses* and *kolkhoses*). Much of the land that had formerly belonged to *sovkhoses* and *kolkhoses* was leased out in a non-transparent manner. Very often the bulk of this land was rented by "local notables", typically former *sovkhos* or *kolkhos* directors or individuals with close personal links to members of the local administration. Most—although not all—of these individuals were Georgians. This added to the impression amongst many local Azeris that they were second-class citizens who did not really belong in the Georgian state.

Since the so-called Rose Revolution of November 2003 and the subsequent election of Mikheil Saakashvili as president of Georgia, the government has made significant efforts to integrate non-Georgian populations into Georgian public life. During the Saakashvili administration the following trends have been observed with respect to the integration of national minorities: greater emphasis on teaching Georgian in schools where national minorities are concentrated, often with the assistance of international donors such as the OSCE; promises to improve the basic infrastructure in areas where national minorities are concentrated, including a promise to rehabilitate the roads linking Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda to other Georgian cities with the help of the US-funded Millennium Challenge; the establishment of a school of public administration, named after the late prime minister Zurab Zhvania, aimed at recruiting members of national minorities to work in the civil service; the establishment of youth camps called "patriot camps" aimed at bringing together young people from different ethnic backgrounds; and the ratification of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, which came into force in April 2006.

Of particular importance for ordinary citizens of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti is

the drive by the Georgian government to teach the state language to members of national minorities that lack mastery of Georgian and the overall standardization of the education system. According to the Law on General Education, passed in 2005, Georgian language and literature, the history and geography of Georgia as well as “other social sciences” would be taught in Georgian as part of the national curriculum by the academic year 2010 at the latest. Moreover, the national entrance examinations that were introduced in 2005 for entry into Georgia's state accredited universities required that students achieve a basic pass mark in Georgian language and literature in order to be eligible for university.

Although these moves marked a genuine effort on the part of the government to engage members of national minorities in public life, the short time-scale in which these measures were introduced appeared rather unrealistic given the low level of competence in Georgian of many members of national minorities. The rapid introduction of examinations in the Georgian language with a minimum of preparation, may have had a contrary effect to that which was intended as university applicants from regions such as Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti in which minorities are concentrated are in effect unable to go to Georgian universities and continue to follow the time-honoured practice of going to Yerevan and Baku to study. In 2005, the first year in which these examinations were introduced, just two out of sixty-four non-Georgian students from Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts passed the examinations and entered state-credited universities. In 2008, numbers remained in single figures; although more Armenian students achieved the bare minimum mark necessary to pass, marks in Georgian dragged down their overall average and prevented them from getting through the tough competition for entry into Georgia's universities. This state of affairs was further exacerbated by the closure of the Akhalkalaki branch of Tbilisi state university.

Another major step taken by the government in the field of education is the provision of text books in core curriculum subjects translated into minority languages. This was first introduced by the Ministry of Education in the academic year 2007-08, when books were provided for the first, seventh and tenth years of schooling. In the academic year 2008-09, books were also made available for second, eighth and eleventh year pupils. In the next several years these translated text books are expected to become available for all school years. Previously all books for national minorities had come from Yerevan or Baku, except for Georgian language books on the history and geography of Georgia. The new books

therefore mark a significant step towards the standardization of education across the country. Although there have been some complaints of mistranslations and inaccuracies in the translation,⁶ most minority stakeholders in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti have registered their approval of the initiative.

Another sphere in which the state has made a significant impact on public life is in improvements in infrastructure. The ongoing project to rehabilitate the transport infrastructure has already cut journey times in the more mountainous and remote municipalities of Akhalkalaki, Ninotsminda and Tsalka and forthcoming road and rail building projects are likely to make further progress in this direction over the coming years. Most of the road between Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki has already been rehabilitated, cutting journey times from Tbilisi to Akhalkalaki from over six hours to around four-and-a-half. Another major project, funded by the US Millennium Challenge, is to reconstruct the highway from Tbilisi through Tsalka in Kvemo Kartli to Ninotsminda, which is expected to be completed in 2011. This will not only reduce travel times still further between Tbilisi and Javakheti, but will also improve the transport infrastructure in Tsalka, which has been very poor until now. Improvements have already been made to the first section of the road between Tbilisi and Manglisi in Tetrtskaro district and travel times between Tbilisi and Tsalka have already been cut from around three hours in 2004 to two hours in 2009. Another major project that is already underway is the building of a railway from the city of Kars in eastern Turkey, through Akhalkalaki and on to Tbilisi and eventually Baku. This project, which was agreed by the leaders of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey in early 2007 is also expected to be completed in 2011.

As well as the transport infrastructure, the Georgian government has also made improvements to the infrastructure in other spheres. In many areas schools have been repaired and computers are now provided in most, if not all, schools. In schools in the town of Akhalkalaki, each child has access to one computer, although the number of computers available in village schools is rather less. Schools now have a budget⁷ and teachers are paid their salaries on time. This represents a significant improvement in comparison with the

⁶ Including one textbook made available to Armenian communities in Akhalkalaki district that contained about 20 pages in the middle in the Azeri language.

⁷ In one school in Akhalkalaki, teachers reported in April 2009 that the budget was equivalent to GEL 550 (approx EUR 330) per pupil, but this had to cover teachers' salaries as well as heating the building. The school in question had some money left over in the 2008 budget to pay for free books for students, but as a result of rising heating costs there were fears that this would not be possible in 2009.

situation in 2004, although there is room for much further improvement as many schools remain in a poor state of repair and are inadequately heated in winter. In 2009, the Georgian government allotted around GEL 20 million for its new Village Support Programme. The aim of the programme is to solve the most urgent infrastructural problems in rural communities as defined by the villagers themselves. In many communities (for example in Akhalkalaki municipality) the project adopted the methodologies used by international aid organizations, whereby villages would elect a board of community members who would organize the project and administer the funds. The government would supply the materials, while villagers would supply the labour. The population of the villages in Bolnisi municipality were allocated GEL 476,903, Tsalka municipality GEL 219,723, Dmanisi GEL 266,220, Gardabani GEL 681,771, Tetritskaro GEL 271,595, Marneuli GEL 781,322 and Akhalkalaki approximately GEL 500,000. Data is not available for other municipalities.⁸

The Georgian government has also begun supplying gas to the towns and villages of Kvemo Kartli and has contracted out the supply of natural gas for households to private companies. According to the then governor of Kvemo Kartli, David Kirkitadze, four villages in Marneuli district were connected to the gas supply network in October 2008.⁹ Kirkitadze also pledged to bring gas to households in Tsalka district, where only a few public buildings in the main town of Tsalka are connected. In late 2008, the Georgian government handed over the local distribution companies to the Azeri gas supplier, SOCAR. Most of the major towns as well as a number of villages now receive natural gas from this supplier. Gas has also been piped to Akhalkalaki, but distribution is in the hands of a private company that charges GEL 400 (EUR 240) to connect dwellings to the gas supply, a price that many households cannot afford. By April 2009, around 600 households had been connected to the gas supply in the town of Akhalkalaki and the government was planning to pipe the gas also to the villages of Javakheti.

Finally, the supply of electricity to rural areas of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti has improved significantly since 2004, with most areas receiving 24-hour electricity for most of the time. Outages still occur as a result of the poor state of repair of the electricity distribution system, although the main energy distributor, Energy-Pro Georgia, which

⁸ "Village Support Program", Kvemo Kartli Independent Media, at <http://www.cida.ge/media/eng/articles.php?id=77>; interviews with the author.

⁹ "David Kirkitadze Demands the Region to be Gasified at Best". Kvemo Kartli Independent Media: News, (28 October 2008), at <http://www.cida.ge/media/eng/reginfo.php>.

provides electricity to around two-thirds of homes in Georgia, has been rehabilitating the electricity distribution network in Bolnisi and Tetrtskaro municipalities in Kvemo Kartli.¹⁰

Greater effectiveness of state institutions in Georgia as a whole has led to improved tax collection, which in turn has led to the state being able to significantly increase transfers of funds to the regions. As a result, the regional budget in most districts has increased significantly. Thus, the budget of Akhalkalaki district municipality has grown from GEL 700,000 (EUR 425,000) in 2005 to GEL 9 million (EUR 5.5 million) in 2009.¹¹ This has allowed the municipalities to devote funds to essential infrastructure repairs such as repairing roads, bridges and drainage systems and ensuring a supply of potable water.

Despite the improvement in the local infrastructure and the greater resources available for local budgets, the development of the local economy has not improved significantly since 2004 either in Samtskhe-Javakheti or in most of Kvemo Kartli. Notwithstanding increases in production of Rustavi's main industries, as well as Georgia Glass and Mineral Waters Company in Borjomi and the gold and copper mines in Kazreti, there are virtually no enterprises in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti except for these entities. As we observed above, output per capita in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti actually fell back with respect to the national average between 2003 and 2007 and economic activity in most of these regions is confined to the sale of imported products such as bottled gas and consumer goods. Agriculture remains primarily a subsistence activity and few small or medium-sized enterprises exist, despite a pledge made by President Saakashvili in July 2007 to create more than a hundred new agricultural processing enterprises.¹² There is no evidence that this project has got off the ground in either of the two regions analysed in this paper. Similarly a promise made by the Georgian Ministry of Defence that the Georgian army would buy up a significant part of the agricultural production of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts to compensate for the withdrawal of the Russian military base (effectuated in 2007) also appears to have come to nothing.¹³

¹⁰ See Kvemo Kartli Independent Media: News (,13 April 2009 and 11 June 2009), at <http://www.cida.ge/media/eng/reginfo.php>.

¹¹ Interview with the *gamebeli* of Akhalkalaki, Nair Iritsyan, 14 April 2009.

¹² Civil Georgia: Online Magazine (25th July 2007) at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=15494>.

¹³ Civil Georgia: Online Magazine (10th August 2005) at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=10516>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark: The Neighbourhood Programme, "Denmark's Caucasus Programme 2005 – 2007: Interventions by the European Centre for Minority Issues" at <http://www.um.dk/NR/rdonlyres/198301C0-3CFF-4AA0-AA32->

In terms of the appointments of personnel to official posts in the local administration of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli little change can be observed with respect to the Shevardnadze period. In Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda municipalities, the principle of co-optation still prevails; top posts are still divvied out to influential Armenians who were prominent during the Shevardnadze period or even earlier (see below). Overall, the key posts at district level, such as the *gamgebeli*, the chief of police, the prosecutor and the chief justice, are Armenians in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts. Most school directors are also Armenians, although most—not having passed the required Georgian language assessments—now hold the title of “acting director”. In Kvemo Kartli, on the other hand, including in those districts in which national minorities make up the majority, all the key posts are held by Georgians, just as they were during the Shevardnadze period. Typically, in those municipalities in which Azeris make up the majority of the population, namely Marneuli, Dmanisi and Bolnisi, a deputy *gamgebeli* is Azeri and one or two members of staff at the district administration (*gamgeoba*), but the rest are Georgians.

Even in the elected bodies at district level in Kvemo Kartli, the *sakrebuloebi* or councils, the numerical strength of ethnic Azeris is significantly lower than the proportion they make up of the population at large. Table 3 shows how Azeris are significantly under-represented in municipalities in which they make up a majority of the population; thus, in Dmanisi and Bolnisi municipalities, where Azeris make up around two-thirds of the population, they only make up a minority of councillors. Similarly in Marneuli municipality, Azeris only make up just over half the number of councillors even though they make up over 80% of the population (compare with Table 1). Minorities were particularly underrepresented amongst those elected by party list of the ruling United National Movement (UNM) in the local elections of 2006.

Table 3 Representation of nationalities in the *sakrebuloebi* of Kvemo-Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti¹⁴

PROVINCE/DISTRICT	Georgians	Azeris	Armenians	Greeks	Others
Kvemo Kartli	59.41%	28.22%	9.90%	0.99%	1.49%
Rustavi city	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Gardabani	59.38%	41.62%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Marneuli	31.03%	55.17%	10.34%	0.00%	0.00%
Bolnisi	57.69%	38.46%	3.85%	0.00%	0.00%
Dmanisi	57.69%	38.46%	0.00%	0.00%	3.85%
Tetritskaro	82.35%	8.82%	10.38%	2.94%	2.94%
Tsalka	47.50%	12.50%	37.50%	2.50%	0.00%
Samtskhe-Javakheti	59.59%	0.00%	39.73%	0.00%	0.68%
Borjomi	95.24%	0.00%	4.76%	0.00%	0.00%
Akhalsikhe	69.23%	0.00%	30.77%	0.00%	0.00%
Adigeni	92.00%	0.00%	8.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Aspindza	95.45%	0.00%	4.55%	0.00%	0.00%
Akhalkalaki	12.50%	0.00%	87.50%	0.00%	0.00%
Ninotsminda	5.00%	0.00%	90.00%	0.00%	5.00%

It is also worthy of note that the system of appointment of *gamgeblebi* continues to ensure strict central control, not only in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti, but also in many other regions of Georgia. On paper, the new Organic Law of Georgia on Local Self-Government, adopted in December 2005, gave more power to the *sakrebuloebi* and its chairperson at municipality level, stipulating as it did that the *gamgeoba* is there to

¹⁴ Research carried out by ECMI; Central Election Commission of Georgia at http://cec.gov.ge/uploads/attachments_old/209_2269_892400_MEMBERSOFSAKREBULOEELECTEDTHROUGHPROPORTIONALSYSYSTEM.doc and http://cec.gov.ge/uploads/attachments_old/209_2269_947315_MEMBERSOFSAKREBULOEELECTEDTHROUGHMAJORITARIANSYSYSTEM.doc.

implement the decisions of the *sakrebulo* and that the head of the executive (or *gamgebeli*) was to be appointed by the *sakrebulo* through a process of competitive tender. According to the Law, the *gamgebeli* was to be accountable to the *sakrebulo*, which would determine his or her salary and working conditions. Previously the *gamgebeli* was formally subordinate only to the president.

However, in reality it would appear that powerful figures within the Ministry of Internal Affairs¹⁵ in Tbilisi or the governor's office in the main city of the province have exerted significant behind-the-scenes influence to ensure that their own approved candidates become *gamgebeli*. This appears to be the state of affairs across Georgia, where central control is reinforced by the fact that Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) won an absolute majority in councils of all Georgian municipalities in the local elections of October 2006. The highly centralized UNM was therefore able to determine who could sit as *gamgebeli* in all municipalities, meaning that the change in the law had little or no impact on the way power is exercised in Georgia's regions. In Kvemo Kartli, the centre appears to have exercised an even higher degree of control than elsewhere over the appointment of *gamgebeli*; stakeholders in Marneuli report that the *sakrebulo* virtually ceased to function once the *gamgebeli* was appointed and that the *gamgebeli* was the choice of the governor's office in Rustavi. In Akhalakalaki municipality, the bureau of the *sakrebulo* had a number of candidates for *gamgebeli* from which to choose on the two occasions in which the *gamgebeli* was replaced in 2008 (see below), but it is also reported that the governor's office in Akhaltsikhe exerted significant influence over who was selected. Overall, therefore, the new Organic Law of Georgia on Local Self-Government has had little impact on the dynamic of power at local level either in Kvemo Kartli or in Samtskhe-Javakheti.

The main change brought about by the new Organic Law of Georgia on Local Self-Government was the way governance worked at community level. The new law abolished the bodies of local self-government at the level of the community (*temi* in Georgian, signifying either a single village or a cluster of several villages). Instead of electing its own council or *sakrebulo*, each community would instead directly elect *one* representative to the

¹⁵ After the Ministry of Internal Affairs subsumed Georgia's intelligence services in late 2004, it gained unprecedented power over all matters of state and became particularly active in regions in which national minorities are concentrated due to the perceived threat of separatism. Vano Merabishvili, the Minister of Internal Affairs, is very close to President Saakashvili and is far more influential than any other minister. It is widely believed that Merabishvili and his deputies have considerable say over who is appointed to key positions in minority regions.

sakrebulo of the municipality and it was the role of this elected representative to represent the interests of the community in the *sakrebulo* of the municipality. At the same time the executive branch of government at the level of the community, the *gamgeoba*, would appoint a trustee to each community and sometimes also a specialist in each individual village. There was thus a parallel system in which each community would have an elected representative as well as a representative of the *gamgeoba* of the municipality. Most respondents from both Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti reported that the representative of the *gamgeoba* was the dominant position of the two. This is not surprising; the *sakrebulo* does not run the municipality on a day to day basis; how to organize and how to spend the local budget is the responsibility of the the *gamgeoba* and its representatives.

Some changes can be observed to the way school directors are appointed, although a degree of centralization still persists, especially in certain municipalities. According to the Law on General Education, adopted in 2005, school directors are to be elected by a board of trustees made up of parents, teachers and one pupil. The first school directors were selected by means of this system in July 2007, but the new system does not yet appear to have been fully implemented in Kvemo Kartli. According to respondents of interviews in Marneuli, the system of appointment of school directors in Kvemo Kartli remains highly centralized. Most directors of Azeri schools were appointed by the centre many years ago and have still not been replaced. So far there has been no occasion in which schools in Marneuli or Bolnisi districts have been able to elect their own director. According to a number of observers, a school in a village in Bolnisi district attempted to do so but their choice of candidate was rejected by the Ministry of Education who explained that until October 2009 it would be the Ministry of Education who appointed the school director. This would appear to run counter to the provisions laid down by law.¹⁶ In Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda municipalities, almost all of the old school directors failed to pass the new qualification examinations held in January 2007 as a result of poor knowledge of the Georgian language; only two directors out of 150 passed the exam, although most stayed on as acting directors until they had the chance to resit the examinations (now scheduled for late 2009). On the few occasions in which ethnic Georgian candidates were nominated by the Ministry of Education and Science to replace the old directors they were rejected by the board of trustees, indicating that the boards do have some real powers.

¹⁶ Interviews with the author.

One tendency that has been observed in recent years in both Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti is towards greater coercive control by the state. In particular, the influence of the Ministry of Internal Affairs has become increasingly pervasive. In Javakheti (Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts), the security services of the Ministry of Internal Affairs have on a number of occasions questioned leaders of NGOs and other civic activists in an attempt to unearth conspiracies against the Georgian state. Their enhanced presence there is often ascribed to the fact that the Minister of Internal Affairs, Vano Merabishvili, and his powerful deputy, Amiran Meskheli, are both from Akhaltsikhe and both are believed to be personally involved in day to day decision-making, especially in the two municipalities of Javakheti. Local observers claim that Akhalkalaki District Branch of the Provincial Office of the Ministry of Internal Affairs is used as the provincial hub for intelligence gathering and routinely refer to the staff of the Office as “KGB”.¹⁷ This reflects the Georgian government's heightened security concerns about events in Javakheti. The police presence is noteworthy in other districts too; in Tsalka municipality, where the near absence of law enforcement agencies may well have been a contributory factor to a series of violent incidents that occurred there in 2005 (Wheatley 2006), the police presence has increased steadily since then.

4. Local Actors

Local actors have far more influence in those areas of Samtskhe-Javakheti where the Armenian minority is concentrated (most notably Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda municipalities, which are collectively known as Javakheti) than in areas of Kvemo Kartli where the Azeri minority is concentrated (such as Marneuli, Dmanisi and Bolnisi districts). In Tsalka district, where a number of national minorities have co-existed for a long period, local elites predominated until around 2005-2006, when the centre began to exert much greater control and undermined their influence.

Javakheti

In Javakheti since the mid 1990s, power at local level has been concentrated in the hands of a number of strategic economic groups, commonly known as clans (Wheatley 2004). These 'clans' were led by powerful local families who had accumulated wealth either as Soviet-era

¹⁷ Interviews with the author. In 2004, the Ministry for State Security (former KGB) was subsumed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MoIA) and security activities are now distributed between different departments of the MoIA.

entrepreneurs¹⁸ or through the opportunities the collapse of the USSR had brought in terms of the possibility to trade goods such as basalt, oil and gas across the newly-established borders. During Shevardnadze's presidency, there were at least two such groups, both of which would periodically be favoured over others by top officials within the presidential administration, parliament or the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Following the collapse of the ruling party, the Citizens' Union of Georgia, at the end of 2001 and the defection of the former chairman of parliament, Zurab Zhvania, to the opposition, one faction, led by individuals loyal to Shevardnadze, appeared to benefit at the expense of another group that was led by Zhvania's associates.

Following the Rose Revolution, the pro-Shevardnadze faction was initially highly suspicious of the new leadership, but was soon brought on board following talks with Saakashvili's close ally Vano Merabishvili (later Minister of Internal Affairs and himself from Akhaltsikhe).¹⁹ The MP for Ninotsminda, Enzel Mkoyan, previously a staunch supporter of Shevardnadze, was made head of Saakashvili's election headquarters during the January 2004 presidential elections and became an influential figure within Saakashvili's ruling party, the UNM. Despite the fact that Zurab Zhvania was made prime minister in 2004, the other main faction never managed to achieve hegemony in Javakheti and the influence of this faction declined further following Zhvania's untimely death in February 2005.

Enzel Mkoyan probably remains the most influential individual in Javakheti today. Individuals believed to be close to him are said to control a significant part of Javakheti's economy. As member of parliament for Ninotsminda, he is frequently invited abroad as a member of various parliamentary delegations.²⁰ Many of those close to him enjoy positions of prominence in both Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki districts, including the chief of Ninotsminda police, a member of Ninotsminda municipality council (who is also one of Mkoyan's relatives), the director of Akhalkalaki resource centre, and the head of the district

¹⁸ For example, one such family had run an iron enterprise and a gas-bottling factory during the Soviet period. Source: Rusiko Mumladze, "Clan-based Rule in Samtskhe-Javakheti", *Rezonansi*, 27 March 2002. In Georgia especially the grey market during the late Soviet period allowed the directors of such enterprises to accrue significant private resources, despite the official ban on private enterprise.

¹⁹ Tamar Asatiani, "Problems of a Ruling Party: 'Regional'", *24 Hours* (4th February 2005), at <http://www.24hours.ge/index.php?n=188&r=8&id=694>.

²⁰ Website of the Georgian Parliament, "Visit of David Bakradze, Speaker of Georgian Parliament and Parliamentary Delegation to US" (31st May 2009) at http://www.parliament.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=1132&info_id=2334; website of the Georgian Ministry of Justice, "Visit of the Georgia Delegation to Estonia is Completed" (4 October 2007) at <http://www.justice.gov.ge/October,%202007.html>.

election commission of Ninotsminda municipality. The family of the latter is said to have significant influence over real estate deals in Javakheti, especially in the village of Gorelovka, until recently inhabited mainly by Russian Dukhobors (see below). Finally, in August 2007, Mkoyan's wife was made acting director of one of Akhalkalaki's main public schools in controversial circumstances, despite her lack of knowledge of the state language.²¹

In Ninotsminda, Mels Bdoyan, another former single-mandate MP of the same constituency who had been chairman of Ninotsminda district executive committee during the last days of communist rule, also sought to rebuild a power base there after being appointed *gamgebeli* of Ninotsminda in late 2004. Although only one party—the UNM—presented a list of candidates for the proportional part of the local elections of October 2006 (in Ninotsminda ten councillors were elected through party lists, while another ten were elected from small community-based constituencies based on the recently-abolished first or lowest level of local self-government, see below), this list was more or less evenly distributed amongst Mkoyan's faction, on the one hand, and Bdoyan's faction, on the other (Lohm 2007). Those elected directly from village level constituencies were also relatively equally divided. Although the newly-elected *sakrebulo* initially elected Bdoyan as chairman of the *sakrebulo*, Mkoyan's faction objected and with the help of the governor of Samtskhe-Javakheti and a number of other Georgian officials managed to ensure that Bdoyan voluntarily relinquished his position. Bdoyan was later arrested for corruption.

Another influential figure is Samvel Petrosyan, the former leader of Javakh, the influential public movement that dominated Javakheti in the early 1990s when central state authority was weak or non-existent (Wheatley 2004; Lohm 2007). After Eduard Shevardnadze partially consolidated power in the mid-1990s he was assigned the post of deputy head of the local traffic police, but was later stripped of this position. However, Petrosyan was rehabilitated in the summer of 2006, when he was made chief of police of Akhalkalaki district. This further confirms the principle of co-optation used by the centre to ensure the continued dominance of “loyal” Armenians.

The *gamgeblebi* of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda are officially the heads of the executive branch of the two districts, but over the past fifteen years have tended to be representatives

²¹ "Newly Appointed Director in Akhalkalaki does not Know the State Language" (22 August 2007) at <http://www.humanrights.ge/index.php?a=article&id=1803&lang=en>.

of the main economic groups in the region. However, the current *gamgebeli* of Akhalkalaki, Nairi Iritsyan, appears to be a rather more independent figure, having previously been close to the political organization United Javakh and then being elected as co-chair of the umbrella organization for NGOs, the Javakheti Citizens Forum (see below). The *gamgebeli* has drawn from his NGO background to introduce a number of democratic innovations into the municipality. First of all, he has increased democratic control at village or community level over funds allotted by the Village Support Programme (see above), which amounted to GEL 500,000 in 2009 (included in the overall budget for the municipality, see above) through the election of a board of community members to decide how funds from the programme should be administered. Another innovation launched by the current *gamgebeli* is the practice of holding popular elections for the post of specialist or trustee of the *gamgeoba* (municipality administration) at the level of the village or community in cases in which there are more than one candidate for the job.²²

Given the “lock on power” held by the dominant factions in Javakheti and their backing from powerful figures within the Georgian authorities, it is difficult for outsiders to make many inroads into local power structures in Javakheti. In part this is due to lack of development of the economy of Javakheti, which means that there are very few activities that are financially lucrative in the region and these are almost always associated with the import and export of commodities such as oil and gas, which are under the almost full control of the dominant economic groups (Wheatley 2004). Some new actors, however, have been attempting to “break into” the system over recent years, with varying degrees of success.

Probably the least successful amongst these are opposition parties. Opposition parties based in Tbilisi have, over the past ten years, showed little if any interest in Javakheti, and the mainly Armenian population, lacking access to much of Georgia's media as a result of the language barrier, has little knowledge even of the existence of nationally-based opposition parties. According to a survey carried out by ECMI in May 2008, just two weeks before parliamentary elections, on average the non-Georgian population could only name 1.94 of the twelve parties and blocs competing in the elections, compared with an average of 4.01 for ethnic Georgians in the provinces of Kakheti, Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti. When prompted by being read the full list of twelve parties and blocs, non-Georgians in Javakheti could still only recognize 2.83 on average, compared with an average of 6.67 for

²² Interviews with the author.

ethnic Georgians in the three above-mentioned provinces.²³ Believing (correctly) that the local population would vote en masse for the UNM, opposition parties did not even bother to campaign in Javakheti during the 2008 parliamentary elections. This further undermined their influence in the region.

Over the past years, opposition parties have only been able to make headway in the region in local and national elections if powerful local factions have chosen to associate themselves with them. Thus, during the 1998 local elections a local initiative group that was disillusioned with the local leadership of Eduard Shevardnadze's Citizens's Union of Georgia teamed up with the National Democratic party and garnered 19.45% of the vote in Akhalkalaki district and 26.56% in the town of Akhalkalaki (International Centre for Civic Culture 1999). Similarly in the disputed November 2003 parliamentary elections, the consequences of which brought about the Rose Revolution, the opposition electoral bloc “Burjanadze-Democrats”, led by Zurab Zhvania and Nino Burjanadze, received 23.36% of the vote in Akhalkalaki district due to the fact that one of the main local factions was close to Zhvania (see above). In the same elections, the leader of the unrecognized local party Virk (see below), Davit Rstakyan, allied himself with a national party, the New Rights and won just under 10% in both Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts. Finally, in the local elections of October 2006, the local movement United Javakh (see below) placed its candidates on the party list of “Industry Will Save Georgia” and as a result garnered 32.55% of the vote in Akhalkalaki municipality, the highest share of the vote any opposition party won in any district of Georgia. However, in the 2008 parliamentary elections, when no local group placed its candidates on the lists of a national opposition party, the ruling UNM won an overwhelming majority, picking up 90.21% of the vote in Akhalkalaki constituency and 91.69% in Ninotsminda, compared with a national average of 59.18%.²⁴

In terms of local political organizations, several have been highly influential in Javakheti over the past two decades. The first was Javakh, a local ethnic Armenian self-help organization that was established in 1988 to defend the local Armenian population against what they saw as a threat from Georgian nationalists such as Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who became president of Georgia in 1991. Javakh was able even to acquire arms from the poorly-supervised weapons supplies of the moribund Soviet army and some members of the

²³ In both cases these findings are statistically significant at the 0.001 level, both using Levene's test for equality of variance, and the t-test for equality of means.

²⁴ Figures from the website of the Central Election Commission of Georgia at www.cec.gov.ge.

organization helped the Karabakh Armenians in the war with Azerbaijan from 1988 to 1994. Javakh dominated political life in the region during the early 1990s and even prevented Gamsakhurdia from imposing his choice of Prefect (*gamgebeli*) on Akhalkalaki district, eventually forcing the Georgian government to accept one of its own leaders, Samvel Petrosyan (see above) as Prefect instead. However, following Shevardnadze's return to Georgia in March 1992, Javakh's power gradually began to diminish. During the mid-1990s, Shevardnadze successfully applied a policy of "divide and rule" by offering the leaders of the organization positions in the local state structures, including Petrosyan, who obtained a senior position in the traffic police.

Another influential organization is Virk. Virk was established in the late 1990s as a regional political party to lobby for Javakheti's political autonomy within Georgia but was denied registration as a national political party because the Law on Political Associations of Citizens does not allow the establishment of regional parties (Wheatley 2004; Lohm 2007). Virk was never able to attract the same number of followers as Javakh had previously.

Relative newcomers on the scene are the youth organization JEMM (Javakheti Youth Sport Union) and the unregistered political party, United Javakh, that was established by a number of JEMM's leaders. JEMM was founded as an NGO in 2001 and its main aim was to prevent the massive out-migration of Javakheti's youth by organising sporting events and setting up at least twenty gyms in Akhalkalaki and the surrounding villages. They also set up a radio station and a monthly magazine (Lohm 2007). In 2005, a number of JEMM activists, including the group's leader, Vahag Chakhalyan, established the political organization United Javakh. United Javakh first emerged into the limelight on 13 March 2005, when it organized a rally in Akhalkalaki to protest against the Georgian government's plans to withdraw Russia's military base from Akhalkalaki, which formed a cornerstone of the local economy and was perceived by the local population as a guarantee against future Turkish aggression. A similar rally was held on 31 March and both events attracted a couple of thousand protesters. United Javakh represented a younger generation of activists, who were disillusioned at the perceived enthusiasm of the older generation of Javakh activists to make a deal with the authorities for their own personal gain.

United Javakh probably reached the zenith of its powers around the time of the local elections in September 2006. Although United Javakh was denied official recognition as a

political party in Georgia on the same grounds that Virk had been denied recognition, the movement came to an agreement with the national opposition party “Industry Will Save Georgia” (IWSG) to put its candidates on the IWSG list for Akhalkalaki municipality. In addition, a number of United Javakh's activists and sympathisers stood as candidates in the twenty-two single-mandate constituencies based around villages or clusters of villages in Akhalkalaki. Not only did IWSG garner over 30% of the vote (see above), despite alleged voting irregularities, but the former mayor of Akhalkalaki, Nair Iritsyan, now a sympathiser of United Javakh, won the single-mandate constituency of Akhalkalaki city—which had many more voters than any other constituency in the district—defeating the favoured candidate of the local and national authorities. Another supporter of United Javakh, Andranik Abelyan, also prevailed in the community of Kumurdo. In Ninotsminda, however, United Javakh had less success; the UNM ran uncontested and its party list as well as most candidates in single-mandate constituencies were supporters of either Enzel Mkoyan or Mels Bdoyan (see above).

The relative success of United Javakh at once drew the attention of the local and national authorities, who sought to undermine the new movement both by force and persuasion. Two days after the elections United Javakh staged a demonstration in Akhalkalaki against what they claimed was massive voter fraud in the elections, especially in Akhalkalaki's villages²⁵ and protesters tried to take over the office of the District Election Commission in Javakheti. As a result a brawl developed in which shots were fired into the air and Akhalkalaki's chief of police, Samvel Petrosyan, was slightly injured. Chakhalyan was arrested soon afterwards in Armenia after crossing the Georgian-Armenia border, although he was released again some three weeks later. The local elites then united in their opposition to United Javakh with even the normally radical Davit Rstakyan (Virk), finding common cause with his erstwhile opponents, sharply criticising the new organization.

Throughout 2007 and 2008, the influence of United Javakh diminished sharply as the organization began to fragment. In the months after the disputed elections, tensions remained high; Iritsyan remained sharply critical of the local authorities, especially after he was not given the chair of any of the committees of the new Akhalkalaki *sakrebulo*, despite winning more votes than any other candidate in the local elections. In April 2007, Iritsyan was even briefly arrested after a dispute between him and a number of United Javakh activists

²⁵ In one village, the UNM allegedly won over 100% of the vote!

(including Abelyan) on the one hand and the driver of the local prosecutor on the other.²⁶ However, after a close associate of Iritsyan's, Harutyun Hovannesian, was appointed *gamgebeli* of Akhalkalaki municipality on 7 February, Iritsyan was made his deputy.²⁷ Later, on 2 May 2008, after Hovannesian had been selected as candidate in the single-mandate constituency of Akhalkalaki for the UNM in the forthcoming parliamentary elections, Iritsyan was made *gamgebeli*.²⁸ Despite his earlier oppositional stance, Iritsyan was able to find common language with the authorities and it was possibly as a result of his influence that both Hovannesian and the UNM were able to achieve such a handsome victory in the 2008 parliamentary elections in Akhalkalaki (see above). Moreover, unlike in previous contests, rivals of the authorities (such as what was left of United Javakh) did not lend their support to any national opposition party.

Vahag Chakhalyan, meanwhile, remained an implacable opponent of the local authorities in Javakheti, and his relationship with the chief of police of Akhalkalaki, Samvel Petrosyan was particularly poor. On 17 July 2008 there was a powerful explosion near Petrosyan's house, which Petrosyan blamed on United Javakh activist Gurgen Shirinyan. There then followed a police operation against the activists of United Javakh, during which two policemen died in unclear circumstances and firearms were allegedly discovered in the offices of United Javakh. Around fifteen activists were arrested, including Chakhalyan, and members of both Shirinyan's and Chakhalyan's families. Shirinyan himself escaped and his whereabouts remain unknown. United Javakh accused the local authorities of staging the bomb blast near Petrosyan's house to provide a pretext to launch a crackdown against United Javakh and of planting arms in the offices of the movement. It is interesting to note that apart from the possession of firearms, Chakhalyan was not charged with any offences relating to the events of July 2008, but was instead charged with alleged provocations committed in the aftermath of the local elections in October 2006 and during demonstrations earlier the same year, even though no charges had been levelled against him immediately after these events. In December 2008, Shirinyan was sentenced to seventeen years' imprisonment *in absentia* for murder, while his father and aunt were convicted of providing false testimony and sentenced

²⁶ "Former Mayor of Akhalkalaki was Arrested", *Armenian News* (25 April 2007) at <http://www.armtown.com/news/en/lra/20070425/12105/>.

²⁷ "New President for the Council" (A-Info website, 10 February 2008), at <http://www.a-info.org/eng/full.php?id=1922>, accessed 28 June 2009.

²⁸ "Nairi Iritsian Elected Chairperson of Akhalkalak Regional Administration" Noyan Tapan: Armenians Today, 8 May 2008, at <http://www.armeniandiaspora.com/archive/136998.html>.

to two years.²⁹ In April 2009, Chakhalyan was found guilty of a number of charges, most dating back to 2006, and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment, while his father and teenage brother received heavy fines for the purchase and possession of weapons.³⁰ Given the time that had passed since the alleged offences were committed by Chakhalyan it is hard to explain these events in any other way than as an attempt by the authorities to crush the United Javakh movement.

Another part of United Javakh appears to be involved in a struggle for economic influence with the local authorities in Javakheti. The village of Kumurdo appears to be home to a family of powerful businessmen that provide support to United Javakh and at the same time are involved in a number of economic spheres that the local political elites have traditionally monopolized, such as the provision of petrol stations. One of these businessmen—who now resides mainly in Russia—is believed to have had a licence to cut wood in Georgia and to sell it to Armenia, although this licence was later revoked (International Crisis Group 2006). It is worth noting that Kumurdo was one of the communities to elect a United Javakh councillor in 2006 (see above). A dispute over business would appear to have precipitated a fight in January 2009 between the supporters of the Kumurdo businessmen on the one hand and Enzel Mkoyan and his supporters on the other. The fight allegedly left Mkoyan injured and resulted in the arrest of four men, although two were later released after paying a fine.³¹

Other activists from Samtskhe-Javakheti that have come into conflict with the authorities include Grigol Minasyan, the director of the Armenian Youth Centre of Akhaltsikhe, and Sargis Akopjanyan, the chairman of the Charles Asnavour Society. This followed an incident in which representatives from a putative Belarussian NGO called the Association for Legal Assistance to the Population (ALAP) came to Akhalkalaki to carry out a public opinion survey. The survey, *inter alia*, contained provocative questions about the arrival of Meskhetian Turks and about separatist movements. The promoters of the questionnaire

²⁹ "Armenian Activists in Javakh Subject to Political Persecution" Hetq Online (12 January 2009), at <http://hetq.am/en/court/armenian-activists-in-javakh-subject-to-political-persecution/>; "A Leader of Georgia's Javakheti Region Seeks Justice" at <http://armenhes.blogspot.com/2009/03/leader-of-georgias-javakheti-region.html>.

³⁰ "Vahagn Chakhalyan Sentenced To 10 Years In Prison", Oratert (9 April 2009) at <http://eng.oratert.com/armenia-hotline/58.html>, accessed 28 June 2009.

³¹ Interviews with the author; "Car of 'United Javakhk' Chairmanship Member Khachik Saharian Blown Up: Latter is Taken to Hospital" from the website "Javakh: The Hidden Truth", quoting Noyan Tapan: Armenians Today (13 March 2007) at <http://www.djavakhk.com/detail.php?r=0&id=4992&l=en>; "Bomb Went Off in United Javakheti Member's Car" (12 March 2007) at <http://www.armtown.com/news/en/lra/20070312/10749/>.

promised to pay up to USD 800 to those who were prepared to interview people and conduct the surveys.³² Minasyan and Akopjanyan were among the most active in promoting the survey and as a result were arrested in January 2009 on charges of espionage, although they were released again in March pending further investigation. Clearly ALAP was not a genuine NGO and was instead a front for some other organization; although a human rights organization called ALAP existed in Belarus in the late 1990s, its leaders were harassed by the country's authoritarian president, Aleksandr Lukashenko, and the Belarussian courts moved to liquidate the organization in 2003.³³ The Georgian government clearly feared that it was part of an attempt by the Russian secret services to provoke separatist sentiment in Javakheti in the wake of the war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008. Many local actors doubt that this act of provocation was arranged by the Russians and suggest that it was set up by the Georgian authorities to expose potentially Russia-loyal activists (see below).

In terms of business elites, in addition to those who are closely connected with the local authorities or to United Javakh, a number of emigre businessmen have also invested in Javakheti. The businessman Aram Sanosyan, a native of Satkha village in Ninotsminda district and currently a resident in Russia, recently built a water pipeline in his native village of Satkha and launched a project to relaunch the garment factory in Ninotsminda (see above).³⁴ He is also said to be involved in the management of the gasification project in Akhalkalaki.³⁵ His brother, Hayk Sanosyan, is a member of the presidium of "Georgian-Armenian Unity" and an MP in the Armenian parliament. The Sanosyans are believed to be involved in other business and infrastructure projects in the region, including a flour mill, a cheese plant in Akhalkalaki and other smaller businesses. They are believed to enjoy a good relationship with the Georgian government.

There are over 100 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Javakheti, of which approximately twenty are active in terms of implementing projects. The most active segment of Javakheti's non-governmental sector is the Javakheti Citizens' Forum (JCF), which by the beginning of 2009 had united under its umbrella 25 NGOs and 458 individuals. The JCF was

³² Interviews with the author.

³³ Belarus Human Rights, Civil Society, Anti-Censorship, etc., Organizations at <http://www.belarus-misc.org/bel-hrbl.htm>; Molly Corso and Gayane Abrahamyan, "Georgia: Espionage Arrests of Ethnic Armenians Stoke Suspicion of Russia", Eurasia Insight, 12 February 2009 at <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav021209b.shtml>.

³⁴ Noyan Tapan: Armenians Today, 4 May 2007, at <http://www.djavakhk.com/detail.php?r=0&id=5235&l=en>.

³⁵ Kristine Aghalaryan, "Javakhk in Peril: Georgian State Machinations and Armenian Apathy", Hetq Online (6 April 2009), at <http://hetq.am/en/politics/javakhk-5/>.

established in 2004 with the support of the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) with a view to building the capacity of local communities to aggregate their interests and to establish a regular line of communication with the Georgian government. The JCF has established working groups, which hold regular meetings to discuss issues facing the local communities in the socio-economic sector, in the fields of human rights, culture and language issues, and in connection with issues of local self-governance. JCF has also been involved in training and capacity-building of local teachers and school directors. In terms of contacts with the central government, JCF has begun a dialogue with the Advisor to the President on Minority and Civil Integration Issues. Consultations over the status of the public hospitals in Javakheti between the Advisor and JCF in the summer of 2008 resulted in preserving Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda Public Hospitals on the municipal budget. JCF also holds meetings with the Ministry of Education and Science on education issues, especially the use of the Georgian language in education. By late 2008, the forum had become more or less sustainable and while ECMI planned to continue provision of limited assistance to JCF through small grants in 2009, it was otherwise set to function independently. By 2009, JCF was probably the most powerful and effective non-governmental player in Javakheti and is perceived by the central authorities as a force to be reckoned with. While this has encouraged the central government to engage with the forum on certain key issues, the existence of a relatively powerful body representing mainly ethnic Armenian local interests has also led to a degree of suspicion amongst certain circles within the government who fear that it could be captured by interests representing separatism. While the earlier sympathetic position of the co-chairman of JCF, Nair Iritsyan, towards United Javakh may have fuelled such suspicions, the subsequent rapprochement between the government and Iritsyan, culminating in the latter's appointment as *gamgebeli* (see above), improved trust between the two sides. Nevertheless, there were signs of the old suspicion returning, especially after the war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008. The revelation that the bogus Belarussian NGO ALAP (see above) had approached a range of civil society activists, including also members of the JCF, led to increased surveillance by Georgian counter-intelligence agencies towards the NGO sector.

Kvemo Kartli

Compared with Javakheti there are far fewer influential local actors, given the tendency noted above for the central authorities to be far more involved in the day-to-day management

of the region and not to co-opt leaders of the minority community to run local affairs in the same way as they do in Javakheti. Most of the Georgian administrators in Kvemo Kartli district are either activists from the National Movement or have a background in the law enforcement agencies or the Prosecutor's office. The *gamgeblebi* of Marneuli and Dmanisi belong to the former category, while the *gamgeblebi* of Tsalka and Bolnisi belong to the latter. In Tsalka the current *gamgebeli* (as of June 2008) is the former chief of police.³⁶ Observers note that he is by far the most influential figure in the municipality.³⁷ Many local administrators in municipalities populated by national minorities are outsiders, either from Tbilisi or from the city of Rustavi.

Amongst the single mandate members of parliament in Kvemo Kartli, several are prominent businessmen, the most notable of whom is Koba Nakopia, the former chairman of the supervisory board of the mining company JSC Madneuli. Another is Davit Bezhuashvili, single mandate member of parliament for Tetrtskaro since 1999 and former director general of the gas company Sakgazi. His brother, Gela Bezhuashvili is head of the Georgian intelligence service and former Georgian foreign minister. The only Azeri to be elected in a single mandate constituency was the long-serving MP and former Shevardnadze ally Azer Suleimanov; however Suleimanov is not believed to exert much influence in the region. Two ethnic Azeris from Kvemo Kartli were also elected to parliament on the party list of the UNM, Ramin Bayramov and Isvakhan Shamilov; the former is a young activist who began his career in the NGO sector in Gardabani.

In the 2003 elections, a local Armenian, Haik Meltonyan, was elected as single-mandate member of parliament from Tsalka district for the party “Industry Will Save Georgia” and clearly had the support of many of the large Armenian villages in Tsalka municipality.³⁸ Meltonyan had opposed the uncontrolled settlement of Georgians from Adjara and Svaneti that occurred during the period 2002-2006 and gained the votes of many local Armenians and Greeks as a result.³⁹ In the parliamentary elections of May 2008 his candidature had

³⁶ “Structural Reorganization at Kvemo Kartli Police”, Kvemo Kartli Independent Media (23 January 2008), at <http://www.cida.ge/media/eng/reginfo.php?id=745>; “New Governor in Tsalka”, Kvemo Kartli Independent Media (11 June 2008), at <http://www.cida.ge/media/eng/reginfo.php?id=1758>.

³⁷ Interview with stakeholders, 13 April 2009.

³⁸ Although the contest for the 150 seats elected by proportional representation was held again in March 2004 after the Rose Revolution because of irregularities in the 2003 poll, those elected to single-mandate constituencies in November 2003 were allowed to take their seats in the 2004-2008 parliament without the need for a repeat ballot.

³⁹ Zaza Baazov, ‘Georgian Resettlement Scheme Blamed for Tension’, Caucasus Reporting Service, No. 280,

been proposed by the bloc “Traditionalists—Our Georgia and Women’s Party”, but his candidacy was withdrawn by the Traditionalists bloc ten days before voting.⁴⁰ This led to a relatively high abstention rate amongst the electorate in Tsalka municipality as only around a third of registered voters came to the polling stations.⁴¹ This was significantly less than in other regions of Kvemo Kartli, although this may be partly due to the absence of working-age Armenian men engaged in seasonal labour in Russia and the fact that many ethnic Greeks who had already left the district may still be registered. Nevertheless, the fact that only 269 voters out of a total population of 1,500 in Meltonyan's home village of Nardevani turned out to vote, suggests that a disproportionate number of Armenians deliberately abstained from voting.⁴²

During the administration of Eduard Shevardnadze, the community organization Geyrat was believed to exert significant influence over Azeri communities in Marneuli and Bolnisi districts in particular. Formed in 1990 from the local Azeri intelligentsia, Geyrat helped to protect Azeri citizens during the violent upheavals of the early 1990s, later helped to defuse inter-communal conflicts within the local Azeri community and sometimes also played a mediating role between the community and state law enforcement agencies. However, the movement began to divide in the late 1990s as several prominent members of the organization took up positions in state structures (Wheatley 2005). Geyrat lost more ground in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution; as the capacity of the state increased, the central authorities and the official law enforcement agencies gained a complete monopoly over the conflict resolution process in the region and Geyrat lost its former mediating role and was sidelined by the new government. Leaders of Geyrat claim that the organization's members were subject to pressure from the *gamgeoba* and from the law enforcement agencies not to stand as candidates for the local elections of October 2006. Today Geyrat exists as a small NGO aimed at defending the rights of ethnic Azeris. While they occasionally organize protest rallies against the Georgian government and have certain links with a number of political groups and media outlets in Baku, their influence is a fraction of what it once was (International Crisis Group 2006).

1 April, 2005, at www.iwpr.net.

⁴⁰ See Central Election Commission of Georgia at <http://cec.gov.ge/?que=eng/press-center/press-releases&info=1264>. Note that in the 2008 elections all candidates for single-mandate constituencies had to be nominated by a party or bloc.

⁴¹ "Election Winners", Kvemo Kartli Independent Media, at <http://www.cida.ge/media/eng/articles.php?id=32>.

⁴² <http://e-vote-count.info/?lang=en&district_id=15&precinct_id=656>, accessed 4 April 2009.

Another Azeri nationalist organization operating in Kvemo Kartli is the National Assembly of Azeris in Georgia (NAAG), founded in 2001. NAAG appears to take a more radical position than Geyrat; its leader Dashgin Gulmamedov has called for the creation of a Georgian confederation of constituent regions, and for Azeri to be made an official state language of Georgia.⁴³ Based in Baku and claiming over 14,000 members, NAAG's relationship with both the Georgian and the Azeri authorities is tense. After Gulmamedov accused Georgian gynecologists at maternity hospitals of damaging Azerbaijani women in childbirth, the Georgian authorities began to accuse him and the NAAG of being sponsored by Igor Giorgadze, the pro-Russian former Georgian KGB chief, and *bete-noire* of the Georgian government.⁴⁴ In November 2007 Gulmamedov was arrested and briefly detained in Georgia for allegedly propagating national conflicts⁴⁵ and in March 2009, Gulmamedov was arrested by the Azerbaijani authorities in Baku, charged with swindle and jailed for two years.⁴⁶ Generally speaking, the authorities in Baku support the Georgian authorities' policies towards groups in Georgia that are seen as promoting Azeri separatism and it is likely that Gulmamedov's imprisonment was a result of collaboration between the two governments.

Gulmamedov's name has been linked with another controversial figure from Kvemo Kartli, Fazil Aliyev. Aliyev, despite his Azeri nationality, was originally a supporter of the nationalist Georgian leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia. During the Gamsakhurdia government he was briefly mayor of Gardabani and subsequently deputy prefect of Gardabani district. Following Shevardnadze's return to Georgia he established his own natural gas business, which faced pressure from the governor of Kvemo Kartli, Levan Mamaladze, who sought to bring all economic enterprises in the region under his control. Aliyev claimed that his family was victimized by the local authorities and that masked men attacked the school where his children were studying. He also claimed that this persecution continued under Mikheil Saakashvili and an armed attack on his house in June 2005, which he claimed was the work

⁴³ "Ethnic Azeris demand change in Georgia's political system", Interfax, (Jan 28 2009) at <http://groong.network.mine.nu:8888/wmu/tag/ethnic/>.

⁴⁴ News report dated 26 April 2006 at <http://003eaa4.netsolhost.com/news.asp?news=8350>.

⁴⁵ "Security services of Georgia arrested leader of Azerbaijani diaspora", Eurasian Security Services Daily Review (29 November 2007), at <http://www.axisglobe.com/article.asp?article=1440>.

⁴⁶ "Dashgin Gulmamedov Arrested for Swindle", Turan, (11 March 2009) at <http://dir.groups.yahoo.com/group/HR-Georgia-eng/message/916>; "Georgian Azerbaijanis to hold protest action", Today.Az, (15 May 2009), at <http://www.today.az/news/politics/52331.html>; "Head of National Assembly of Azerbaijanis of Georgia arrested in Baku" (11 March 2009), at <http://www.today.az/print/news/society/51003.html>.

of the authorities, led him to seek sanctuary in Azerbaijan.⁴⁷ In November 2007, when NAAG nominated him as candidate for the January 2008 presidential elections in Georgia, he returned to Georgia and appointed Gulmamedov as his campaign chief. However, following Gulmamedov's arrest, he was forced to withdraw from the race. He stood as candidate for the single-mandate member of parliament in Gardabani district in the parliamentary elections of May 2008 for the Christian Democratic Alliance, but failed to garner even 2% of the vote.

A more moderate group established to represent the interests of the Azeri community in Kvemo Kartli is the Congress of Georgian Azeris, established in March 2008 as an umbrella group uniting at least twelve Georgia-based Azeri NGOs.⁴⁸ The congress denies that it is a political organization and claims that it merely aims to protect the rights of ethnic Azeris and to assist the integration of Azeris into the Georgian community.⁴⁹ Its chairman and co-founder, Ali Babayev has expressed strong criticism of the Georgian government, which he accuses of treating Azeris as second class citizens, and—like Fazil Aliyev—stood as a candidate for the opposition Republican Party in the single-mandate district of Gardabani in the parliamentary elections of May 2008, garnering just over 4% of the vote. The Congress has recently been campaigning for the Georgian government to reopen the Sadakhlo bazaar in Marneuli district near the border of Georgia with Armenia and Azerbaijan, which was closed by the authorities in 2005 to prevent smuggling (see below).⁵⁰ The Congress has also contributed to an alternative NGO report on the implementation by Georgia of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in the region of Kvemo Kartli. Despite its relatively moderate position, the Congress is viewed with suspicion by

⁴⁷ F. Teymurkhanli, "Saakashvili's Accession Created More Problems for Azerbaijanis in Georgia", Zerkalo newspaper (Azerbaijan), 10 October 2005, at <http://www.armeniandiaspora.com/forum/showthread.php?t=39332>; "Priezidenty Gruzii Fazil' Aliiev Opasaietcia za svoiu Zhizn'", News Bakililar.az, at http://news.bakililar.az/news_kandidat_v_prezidenty_11310.html.

⁴⁸ See "Tolerance" Public Association for Human Rights Protection, "On the implementation by Georgia of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in the region of Kvemo Kartli (Georgia): Alternative NGO report" (Tbilisi 2008) at http://www.minelres.lv/reports/georgia/Shadow_Report_Georgia_2008.pdf; "Founding Meeting of Georgian Azerbaijanis' Congress to Take Place on 17 March – Co-founder", Trend News (15 March 2008) at <http://news-en.trend.az/society/diaspora/1157388.html>.

⁴⁹ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Caucasus Report, Georgia's Azeri Minority Treated As 'Second-Class Citizens' (May 4, 2009) at http://www.rferl.org/content/Georgias_Azeri_Minority_Treated_As_SecondClass_Citizens/1621243.html.

⁵⁰ "Congress Of Georgia's Azerbaijanis Applies Georgian President To Restore Sadakhlo Fair", Turkish Weekly 22 April 2009 at <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/73615/-congress-of-georgia-s-azerbaijanis-applies-georgian-president-to-restore-sadakhlo-fair.html>.

many representatives of the authorities, especially at local level; at its inaugural conference in March 2008, informal pressure by the local authorities was applied to a number of founding NGOs not to attend.⁵¹

In terms of NGOs, another influential umbrella organization is the Tsalka Citizens' Forum (TCF). Established in 2005 by ECMI to promote dialogue between local communities in Tsalka and the central government, it has yet to develop the organizational capacity of its counterpart in Javakheti, but by 2009 still managed to unite 7 NGOs and 120 individuals. As well as implementing a number of small grants project and running a resource centre in which training is provided in computing, the TCF has also arranged meetings with representatives of local government and engaged in extensive consultations with JCF and the Council of National Minorities under the state ombudsman's office on issues relevant to multilingual education.

At village level in Kvemo Kartli respected figures, typically of a relatively advanced age, have traditionally wielded significant authority within Azeri communities and have often successfully prevented conflict both between and within villages. Known as *aksakals* ("white beards") these individuals typically belonged to the provincial intelligentsia and were often school directors or simply well-versed in the Islamic behavioural code, *adat* (Wheatley 2005). Some members of Geyrat were also *aksakals*. The role of *aksakals*, however, has become ever more marginal in recent years, especially as conflict resolution is now firmly in the hands of the official law enforcement agencies. According to some reports, however, *aksakals* have had an input in prioritizing projects for the Village Support Programme; reportedly, under their initiative sixteen public gathering places are to be constructed in the villages in Marneuli municipality within the framework of the programme.⁵²

As in Javakheti, opposition parties have little or no influence in Kvemo Kartli, especially in those areas in which the Azeri minority is concentrated. According to the above-mentioned survey carried out by ECMI in May 2008, the non-Georgian population of Gardabani, Marneuli, and Dmanisi municipalities (mainly Azeris) appeared to be even less aware of the party system than their counterparts in Javakheti. On average they could only name 1.38 of the twelve parties and blocs competing in the elections, and when prompted by being read

⁵¹ Tolerance, "On the implementation by Georgia..."

⁵² "Village Support Program", Kvemo Kartli Independent Media at <http://www.cida.ge/media/eng/articles.php?id=77>.

the full list of parties and blocs, they could recognize just 2.05 on average, compared with an average of 6.67 for ethnic Georgians in Kakheti, Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti and 2.83 for non-Georgians (mainly Armenians) in Javakheti.⁵³ Many members of national minorities in Kvemo Kartli only knew of the ruling UNM. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the UNM won the elections in Kvemo Kartli by a massive margin.

5. Migration and Seasonal Labour

Over the last twenty years, Georgia has been subject to major demographic changes, which have led to a significant migration out of the country. Although both Georgians and members of national minorities have left the country, disproportionately more members of the latter group have emigrated. If we compare the 1989 and 2002 censuses and compare the proportion of each national group in all districts of the country in which both censuses were carried out (i.e. excluding most of the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where the 2002 census could not be carried out), we find that the proportion of national minorities fell from 26.4% in 1989 to 16.2% in 2002. Most of this fall is accounted for by reductions in the size of the Russian (from 6.3% to 1.5%), Armenian (from 7.5% to 5.7%) and Greek (from 1.8% to 0.3%) populations. Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti have been relatively unaffected by these trends, except for Tsalka municipality, where the proportion of ethnic Greeks fell from 61.0% in 1989 to 22.0% in 2002 (and to around 5% today), Akhaltsikhe municipality, where the proportion of Armenians fell from 42.8% in 1989 to 36.6% in 2002, and Ninotsminda municipality, where the proportion of Russians (mainly belonging to the Dukhobor religious sect) fell from 8.3% in 1989 to 2.7% in 2002 (and far fewer today). Of these major demographic changes, both out-migration of Greeks from Tsalka and of Dukhobors from Ninotsminda will be the focus of this paper; however, I will also look at two other trends that have shaped the lives of members of national minorities in recent years: the tendency of ethnic Armenians in Javakheti and Tsalka districts to travel to Russia in the summer for seasonal labour and the migration of Georgians from Adjara and from the mountainous region of Svaneti in the north of the country into regions in which national minorities are concentrated—most notably Tsalka municipality.

Tsalka: The Greek exodus and the arrival of ecological and economic migrants

⁵³ In both cases these findings are statistically significant at the 0.001 level, both using Levene's test for equality of variance, and the t-test for equality of means.

Following the collapse of the USSR and the instability and warlordism that occurred in Georgia in the early 1990s, the Greek population of Tsalka began to leave for Greece. Georgian Greeks could enter Greece relatively easily as Greek immigration law was poorly enforced and immigration of those claiming Greek ethnicity was encouraged. According to unofficial figures provided by the *gamgebeli* of Tsalka municipality, by 2006 the number of Greeks had fallen to around 1,500 from just under 4,600 in 2002 and just over 27,000 in 1989. Local experts estimated that by 2009 there were no more than 1,000 Greeks in Tsalka municipality, most of them elderly.

Once the exodus of Greeks was well underway, a major process of in-migration began from other parts of Georgia. According to figures provided by Tsalka municipality *gamgeoba*, by 2006 around 6,500 ethnic Georgian migrants had settled in the municipality. By far the greatest number of these (approximately 70%) came from the Autonomous Republic of Adjara and most of these came from Khulo municipality, which is notorious for landslides and a shortage of land. Some also came from the mountainous region of Svaneti in the northwest of the country, which is often affected by avalanches. Mass migration from Adjara and Svaneti began in 1998, and gathered pace in 2002 despite the unwillingness and/or incapacity of Eduard Shevardnadze's government to regulate or even register internal migration. The new wave of migration that occurred in 2002 was almost entirely spontaneous as those who had already settled near Tsalka invited their relatives. It was also partly motivated by the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, which passed through the district and provided (generally unskilled) work for many of the newcomers. Until 2004 the flow of migrants was totally unregulated; many of the newcomers were not even registered with the local *sakrebulo* and their names did not appear in any local census (Wheatley 2006). During 2005-2006, some effort was made to monitor who was settling and during 2006 the flow of economic migrants slowed anyway as work on the pipeline dried up. Smaller groups of migrants, mainly from mountainous regions of Adjara affected by landslides, have been allowed by the government to settle since 2006; however this process was far better administered than previously and the migrants are predominantly ecological migrants, rather than economic migrants.

The rapid influx of new migrants into Tsalka led to an unstable and conflict-prone situation in which two groups of people coexisted but had little capacity to communicate. On the one hand was the original population that consisted mainly of Armenians and the few remaining

Greeks, as well as a few compact settlements of Azeris, who had little contact with other population groups. On the other hand there were a large number of newly-arrived rural Georgians, most of whom could not speak Russian, which had hitherto been the main language of inter-ethnic communication. The communication barrier between the two groups combined with the lack of any kind of state regulation was bound to lead to tension and this was exacerbated by land shortages and a perception by many of the original inhabitants that the newcomers were favoured for work on the BTC pipeline. After a spate of clashes between original inhabitants and newcomers, which reached a peak in early 2005, Georgian law enforcement agencies entered the region and began to restore order (Wheatley 2006). The subsequent decline in the number of new arrivals combined with greater control by the law enforcement agencies has since appeared to calm the situation.

Seasonal Migration

Seasonal migration to Russia is prevalent amongst the Armenian populations of Javakheti and Tsalka municipalities. A significant proportion of working-age men from these communities travel every year to Russia (generally early spring) to work as manual labourers (typically in the construction sector). Despite the recent deterioration of relations between Russia and Georgia, this process is continuing, because most of the migrant workers have obtained either Armenian or Russian passports. While Georgian citizens face draconian restrictions if they want to visit Russia, Armenian citizens can enter relatively easily. However, according to Georgian law dual citizenship is not permitted and an individual who adopts the citizenship of another country, in principle, automatically loses his or her Georgian citizenship, a fact of which most Armenians of Javakheti and Tsalka are unaware.

It is estimated that two or three thousand inhabitants of Javakheti may have Russian citizenship; many obtained Russian passports when the 62nd Divisional Russian military base was stationed in Akhalkalaki (before its withdrawal in 2007). All military personnel at the base (of which around a thousand were local Armenians) were required to adopt Russian citizenship. During that time and subsequently, dealers have also been operating in Akhalkalaki selling Russian (and Armenian) passports for those wishing to work in Russia and some citizens also travel to Yerevan in order to obtain Russian passports. The number of local Armenians with Russian passports has alarmed the Georgian authorities, who fear that Russia may use this issue as a pretext for intervening in Javakheti, given that the justification

for Russia's intervention in South Ossetia was ostensibly to protect its own citizens.⁵⁴ Since February 2007, when Armenia adopted a law allowing dual citizenship for foreign nationals of Armenian descent, there has been increasing demand for Armenian passports, which appears to have accelerated since the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia reduced the opportunities for Georgian citizens to receive Russian passports. During the first few months of 2009, demand for Armenian passports was particularly high as local residents planned to leave for seasonal work in Russia; according to one source, 1,500 individuals from Javakheti received Armenian passports in the beginning of 2009.⁵⁵ Some young people also took Armenian passports to work or study in Yerevan.

Although accurate figures are unavailable, it is likely that the number of seasonal migrants has fallen significantly over the last few years partly as a result of bureaucratic barriers, partly as a result of reported instances of discrimination against migrants from the Caucasus in Russia and partly because of the infrastructural improvements that have taken place in some settlements in Javakheti (see above), which may have encouraged some inhabitants to remain. For example, in the village of Kartikami, a few kilometers from Akhalkalaki, virtually no-one leaves the village for summer work in Russia today, even though it was common several years ago. Seasonal migration from the more remote villages, however, still occurs.

Departure of the Dukhobors

The Russian religious dissenters, the Dukhobors, were exiled to the periphery of the Russian Empire in the 1830s and 1840s for their refusal to do military service or pay taxes. They established eight settlements in what is now Ninotsminda municipality (then called Bogdanovka): the town of Bogdanovka (now Ninotsminda), and the villages of Gorelovka, Tambovka, Orlovka, Spasovka, Troitskoye or Kalinino (now Sameba), Yefremovka and Rodionovka. By 1989, 3,161 Dukhobors remained in Ninotsminda district but during the 1990s most left for Russia as a result of the ethnic chauvinism that erupted in Georgia during the leadership of Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1990-91) and of the instability that followed (during which the region was controlled by the paramilitary Armenian organization Javakh, see above). They were also encouraged to return to Russia by a number of Russian patriotic organizations, and by the time the 2002 census was carried out just 943 Dukhobors

⁵⁴ From 2002, a majority of citizens living in South Ossetia and Abkhazia were granted Russian passports.

⁵⁵ Interviews with the author.

remained, mainly in the villages of Gorelovka and Orlovka. In some villages, such as Spasovka, ecological migrants from Adjara (ethnic Georgians) arrived to replace them, while in other villages Georgian migrants came for a short time, but did not stay (Lohm 2006).

The emigration of Dukhobors continued through the first decade of the twenty-first century and by the time of writing (mid-2009) some of the last Dukhobors were preparing to leave the village of Gorelovka. The turning point came in 2005-2006 as a result of increasing pressure exerted by the local authorities for control over Dukhobor lands (see next section). Following a number of incidents of vandalism of Dukhobor property in late 2006, the community decided to leave for Russia. About fifty Dukhobor families left in 2007 for the Bondarsky district of Tambov province in Russia and it was planned that the rest of the community would leave in 2008. However, the war between Russia and Georgia appears to have put their plans to emigrate on hold, at least for a while, as it is unclear how the Dukhobors—for the most part Georgian citizens—will be able to obtain Russian visas. According to a Dukhobor community leader, by mid 2009 there were 58 Dukhobor families left in Gorelovka, covering about 200 individuals.⁵⁶

The departure of the Dukhobors has provoked competition between Georgians and Armenians as to who has the right to occupy the houses they are abandoning. Local Armenian residents rushed to claim the houses and associated lands and it was reported that this action was coordinated by the family of the former head of Gorelovka community (*temi sakrebulo* and current head of the District Election Commission of Ninotsminda municipality. It was also reported that the Georgian Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation was buying the abandoned houses, leading to fears amongst the local Armenian community that they would be used for the resettlement of (ethnic Georgian) economic migrants. According to one report, the Ministry was buying up those houses that had been purchased for Georgian eco-migrants by the nationalist organization, the Merab Kostava Foundation, when the last wave of Dukhobors emigrated in the early 1990s. Many of these houses were informally occupied by local Armenians after Georgian migrants had either failed to resettle or abandoned them after a short stay.⁵⁷ The rumours and counter-

⁵⁶ Interviews with ECMI staff.

⁵⁷ During the period 1989-91, the Kostava Foundation bought 258 houses for eco-migrants and other families in need, of which 217 were in Dukhobor settlements in Ninotsminda district. Out of these 14 houses were located in Ninotsminda, 31 in Spasovka village, 36 in Yefremovka, 20 in Orlovka, 47 in Gorelovka and 69 in Sameba. However of the 217 houses in question, just 68 out were handed over to the new owners; the rest remained empty or were taken over by local Armenians (Trier and Turashvili 2007).

rumours that began to spread in Ninotsminda municipality as the Dukhobors left led to considerable uncertainty about who would have the rights to their houses and land. By 2009, local sources reported that 35 Georgian families from Adjara had recently settled in Gorelovka, constituting between 120 and 140 individuals.⁵⁸

6. Land Distribution

Within Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti there are three issues that have had the potential to exacerbate ethnic tensions over the past ten or fifteen years. These are: (i) a shortage of land in Marneuli and Bolnisi municipalities, especially in predominantly Azeri villages, (ii) the distribution of land formerly owned by ethnic Greeks to (mainly ethnic Georgian) ecological and economic migrants in Tsalka district and (iii) the redistribution of land formerly owned by the Russian Dukhobor communities in Ninotsminda municipality in Samtskhe-Javakheti.

Distribution of Land in Marneuli and Bolnisi municipalities

According to a resolution passed by the Georgian government in 1992, no land could be privatized within 21km of the state border. The same resolution redistributed land from the former collective farms to private owners, paving the way for the formal privatization process, which began after the Law on the Ownership of Agricultural Land was passed in 1996. The 21 km limitation had already been cancelled by a new resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Georgia in 1994, although the law On the State Border (1998) defined a 5km border zone and a 500m border line in which land privatization remained restricted. By the time the 21 km restriction was lifted, much of the land near the border had already been leased out by the state in a non-transparent manner. Subsequently there was no opportunity for those affected by this law to get the land back and their land allocation was restricted to their household plot (generally 0.15-0.25 hectares). On the other hand, those in other regions of Georgia that benefited fully from the distribution of collective farm land received up to 1.25 hectares. Although the 21km rule ostensibly applied to all those living close to the state border, in practice it was applied selectively mainly to Kvemo Kartli and the main losers were ethnic Azeris in Marneuli and Bolnisi districts, while the main beneficiaries were local power-brokers and wealthy businessmen from Tbilisi, most (but not all) of whom were ethnic Georgians. On a number of occasions these individuals would then sub-let the land to

⁵⁸ Interviews with the ECMI staff.

local residents for a profit.⁵⁹ This led to a sense of grievance among many ethnic Azeris and violence occasionally erupted in conflicts related to land distribution. One such dispute in December 2004 in the village of Kulari (Marneuli district) between local inhabitants and employees of the Tbilisi-based Jockey Club, which owned a large horse farm near the village, resulted in the death of an elderly Azeri woman.

In July 2005, the Parliament of Georgia adopted the Law on Privatization of Agricultural Land Owned by the State. According to this Law, plough land, meadows, land under perennial plants, artificial fishing ponds and general water objects previously owned or leased by the state became subject to privatization. It now became possible to privatize land within the border zone; even land along the border line (i.e. within 500m of the border) could be privatized on a case by case basis with the permission of the Georgian government. Privatization was conducted both through auctions and by direct sale; land would be sold by means of an auction if it had not been leased, while leased land could be bought through direct sale. In most cases, those who were already leasing got first option to buy it. Nevertheless, up to 8,000 Azeris received plots of 0.5 hectares during the first seven months of 2006 alone as a result of the new law (International Crisis Group 2006). Land along the border with Azerbaijan around the village of Vakhtangisi was privatized, and the principal beneficiaries were Azeri villagers. Similarly, in certain locations in Kvemo Kartli where violations in the original leasing process were revealed, the leased land was taken away from the lessees and sold by special auction to the local population, and once again the main beneficiaries were Azeris.⁶⁰ While the current situation marks a significant improvement on the situation several years ago, some local Azeris remain short of land. The incapacity of much of the Azeri population of Kvemo Kartli to profit from the opportunities of land privatisation can be ascribed—in part at least—to a lack of knowledge of their own legal rights..

⁵⁹ German Organization for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) and Caucasus Institute of Peace, Democracy and Development (Tbilisi), "Potential for Conflict Related to Land Problems in Georgia's Marneuli and Gardabani Districts" at http://www.pasos.org/content/download/57477/203611/file/45_171_803701_LandProblem-Eng%5B1%5D.pdf.

⁶⁰ Information obtained from the Association for the Protection of Landowners' Rights.

Redistribution of Land in Tsalka Municipality

As we saw in the previous section, rapid demographic changes in Tsalka municipality over the past ten years have led to a number of disputes over land between the original inhabitants (mainly Armenians and Greeks) and the newcomers (mainly Georgians from Adjara and Svaneti). The migration process itself was examined above; here our focus will be only on the process of land redistribution.

During the period 1991-2006, the majority of ethnic Greeks emigrated from Tsalka municipality, mainly to Greece. From 1998, ecological migrants from Adjara and Svaneti began arriving as a result of avalanches and mudslides in their home regions. This migration process gained momentum in 2002, when a new wave of migrants, mainly from Adjara, arrived in the hope of finding work during the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline which ran through the area. Most of the new migrants occupied the houses left by the departing Greeks and frequently rented or “bought” the houses unofficially from the relatives of the departees who were still living in the region. However, having no legal status, the newcomers had no rights to the lands associated with the houses they had occupied (i.e. land from the former collective farms that the former owners had acquired). Given the lack of any kind of regulation from the state, this led to resentment and sometimes even conflicts between the original residents and the newcomers (Wheatley 2006).

The Georgian state's first major intervention in this process came in 2006, when the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation began buying houses formerly owned by Greeks. By 2008, 600 houses had been purchased for ecological migrants and each of the migrant families was provided with 1.25 hectares of land. However, other migrant families who had not the good fortune to have land purchased for them by the government (mainly economic migrants) were left without any land at all, leading to tensions both between newcomers and original inhabitants and even within settler communities. According to a new initiative of President Saakashvili, all those permanently residing in Tsalka municipality who have no access to land—including all new migrants—are now entitled to a “presidential gift” of between 0.3 and 1.0 hectares. This process began with an amendment to the Law of Georgia On Recognition of Title to the Lands Plots Possessed (Used) by Individuals and Legal Entities under Public Law on 21 March 2008, which established the principle of a free land endowment, and at the time of writing the Georgian parliament planned to further amend the

Law to provide free land plots to all those who have not so far received them.⁶¹ This latest initiative was spearheaded by Tsalka's single mandate member of parliament, Mikheil Tskhitishvili.⁶² The process is expected to be complete by the end of November 2009 and 1,700 families are expected to benefit.⁶³

Redistribution of Dukhobor Land in Ninotsminda Municipality

As has already been outlined above, uncertainty over land rights in the village of Gorelovka has prompted the emigration of most of the remaining Dukhobors of Ninotsminda municipality over the last few years. The local land commission that redistributed land in Ninotsminda during the first wave of land privatization in the 1990s decided that no lands would be privatized in Gorelovka. Instead, the rights of management of the Dukhobor land in the village was handed over to an agricultural cooperative called Dukhoborets, which was never properly registered in the Entrepreneurial Registry. Although the then *gamgebeli* of Ninotsminda municipality signed a lease agreement with Dukhoborets in 2002, stating that Dukhoborets was leasing just over half the land of the former collective farm, the lease was not drawn up in accordance with the law and was therefore not legally valid.⁶⁴ In 2005 when the Law on Privatization of Agricultural Land Owned by the State allowed the privatization of lands still owned and leased by the state, the Dukhobor land was officially neither under public ownership nor leased by the state (given the invalidity of the earlier legal documents). While the law gave first priority for purchase to the person or persons currently leasing the land before the land was sold at auction (see above), it was unclear whether the flawed agreements signed by Dukhoborets gave the Dukhobors any rights at all. Moreover, the Dukhoborets co-operative legally inherited the debts of the old collective farm and therefore by law owed more than GEL 4 million (approx EUR 2 million) to the regional tax department (Lohm 2006).

The situation was further complicated by the attitude of the authorities of the municipality and of the community *sakrebulo*, which from 2002 was controlled by a local Armenian

⁶¹ Website of the Association for the Protection of Landowners' Rights, "Law of Georgia On Recognition of Title to the Lands Plots Possessed (Used) by Individuals and Legal Entities under Public Law last amended on 21 March 2008" at <http://www.aplr.org/files/2/kquzze0x6.pdf>.

⁶² "Population of Tsalka Receives Land Plots For Free of Charge", Kvemo Kartli Independent Media (30 June 2009), at <http://www.cida.ge/media/eng/reginfo.php?id=2571>.

⁶³ Interviews carried out by the author.

⁶⁴ It lacked a proper map delineating exactly what lands are leased, a proper signature of the Public Registrar and a registration number from the Public Registry (Lohm 2006).

closely connected to the main strategic economic group in Javakheti. It soon became clear that local power brokers were intent on nullifying the lease of the Dukhoborets co-operative and gaining control over most or all of the Dukhobor lands. When a local land commission was established to decide the fate of the Dukhobor cooperative, this commission was dominated by the leader of the community *sakrebulo* and his close associates. Of the 1,700 hectares of land that the cooperative had originally leased, the Dukhobors were only allowed to keep 450 hectares. After a bad hay harvest in 2006, the Dukhobors were left without enough food to feed their cattle, prompting their decision to emigrate. This decision has led to a further struggle between local power brokers and the Georgian authorities over ownership of the land that the Dukhobors are abandoning and to a determination by local Armenians to prevent an inflow of Georgian ecological migrants (see above).⁶⁵

7. The View from Below

So what is the view of the communities in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javkheti about the way they are governed? In particular, how do minority communities perceive the majority Georgian population and the Georgian government? What are the main issues that engage them? These questions are especially relevant after the war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008 as it led to fears among the Georgian population that Russia would seek to exploit Georgia's minorities to further sow discord and split up the Georgian state. For the purposes of this paper I will focus on the two largest minorities in the two regions: the Armenians of Javakheti and the Azeris of Kvemo Kartli.

The Armenians of Javakheti

Probably the most important issue for the Armenians of Javakheti is the need to preserve the Armenian language and with it their Armenian identity. Most of the complaints and grievances articulated by Javakheti's Armenians relate to the fear that the majority population wants either to drive them out of the country or assimilate them and turn them into Georgians. For the Armenians—as for most of the peoples of the Caucasus—probably the most important identity marker is that of language. For this reason the Georgian government's initiative to ensure that members of national minorities know Georgian is seen not only as a measure to promote national integration, but by some also as a first step towards assimilation. For this reason, two recent measures introduced by the Georgian

⁶⁵ For a detailed description of the privatization process see Lohm (2006).

government have caused particular concern: the issue of strengthening the Georgian language in the education system and professional tests for state employees that include tests of employees' knowledge of Georgian.

The most controversial measure regarding the use of Georgian in schools is the plan to ensure that history, geography and other social sciences be taught in Georgian by 2010 (see above). For Armenians, language and history are inextricably linked; if you do not know the history of your own people in your own language, you risk losing your identity as an Armenian. There is also the issue of the version of history that is being taught. All nations in the Caucasus have their own historical narratives that aim to assert the primacy of the nation over the territories they claim as theirs and these historical narratives are often incompatible with one another. The Armenians fear a “Georgianized” version of history will be taught, which is incompatible with their own historical narrative.

The issue of professional testing in the Georgian language relates to the fear that the Georgian government is planning to dismiss all Armenian staff in local state structures and replace them with Georgians, using the language tests as a pretext. Armenian activists point to the fact that virtually all Armenian school directors in Javakheti failed tests in Georgian held in 2007 (see above) and now risk losing their jobs to Georgian competitors. They also point to similar language tests for other civil service professionals such as judges, policemen and notaries, which they claim will eventually be used to replace Armenians with Georgians and wrest away any leverage Armenians now have over running their own affairs.

To protect the use of Armenian in public life, many local Armenians advocate making Armenian a local official language in those municipalities—such as Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda—in which Armenians make up a majority. This demand has been articulated a number of times by nationalist organizations such as United Javakh, JEMM and Virk and a number of local NGOs.⁶⁶ Some go further and call for Javakheti to be made an autonomous region within Georgia with its own directly elected assembly.⁶⁷ However, the Georgian government rejects both ideas, arguing that to grant autonomy to Javakheti would risk the disintegration of the country, while giving any kind of official status to Armenian would undermine the process of national integration.

⁶⁶ Civil Georgia: Online Magazine (16th March 2006) at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=12088>; interviews with the author.

⁶⁷ Civil Georgia: Online Magazine (26th September 2005) at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=10827>.

In many respects the perceptions of threat articulated by Javakheti's Armenians are rather exaggerated. Given the still low levels of Georgian proficiency amongst local teachers, it is highly unlikely that the plans to teach history and geography in Georgian will come into effect as scheduled in 2010. Similarly the sweeping personnel changes that local Armenian activists feared would occur have not taken place. Only in Akhalkalaki municipal registry and in the local tax department have ethnic Georgians been appointed to senior positions. All the key posts in other local power structures of the two municipalities are held by Armenians, including the *gamgeblebi*, chiefs of police, prosecutor, the chief justice, one of the two notaries and almost all the staff of the *sakrebulo* and *gamgeoba*. While it is true that most Armenian school directors failed the professional tests and could not officially keep their positions, the vast majority stayed on as acting directors and will have a second chance to pass the tests in late 2009.

Moreover, perceptions are changing amongst the local Armenian population. If five years ago, a majority of the population had little if any interest in learning Georgian, today most local Armenians deem it as necessary, even though many lament that the facilities required for the effective teaching of Georgian are insufficient. Similarly, demands for the full autonomy of Javakheti are less frequently heard these days and have gradually given way to calls to make Armenian a local official language. This may in part be due to the fact that the population feels less “neglected” as improvements to the local infrastructure have led to modest improvements in the quality of life and it may partly be due to a realization that given the recent hostilities with Russia, more radical demands such as full autonomy are unrealistic, especially as the Armenian government does not support such demands.

Another existential fear of many Javakheti Armenians is that they are gradually being forced out of the country and that the demographic balance in Javakheti will be altered as Georgians and even Meskhetian Turks are encouraged to settle in the region. According to one wildly exaggerated rumour, the government was planning to settle some 60,000 Meskhetians in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda municipalities alone. A more legitimate cause for concern is the exodus of educated people from Javakheti, especially to Yerevan, where most students go to university. Given the high level of competition for entry into Georgian universities and the built-in disadvantage faced by Armenian teenagers in the university entrance examinations due to their poor knowledge of Georgian, very few local Armenians are able to study in state-accredited universities. An unwelcome development in this regard was the closure of the

Akhalkalaki branch of Tbilisi state university in 2007 after it was denied accreditation by the Ministry of Education and Science, leaving few opportunities for local Armenians to study in Georgia. Many young graduates from Javakheti, having studied in Yerevan, decide to remain there.

The threat of a major demographic shift from Armenians to Georgians is, however, somewhat overstated. More than nine-tenths of the population of Javakheti remain Armenian. Although a few ecological migrants from other parts of Georgia have settled in Javakheti, their numbers are very small and most settled there in the late 1980s or early 1990s. Even if some Georgians settle in Gorelovka after the departure of the Dukhobors—a prospect that has aroused anxiety amongst some Armenians—the number is likely to be small given the size of the settlement involved. Fears about the possible resettlement of Meskhetian Turks in Javakheti are also overstated; the government appears likely to restrict the number of Meskhetian Turks to a relatively small number per year and these are likely to be settled in villages of Akhaksikh, Adigeni and Aspindza municipalities from which they mostly were deported sixty-five years ago; very few are expected to arrive in Javakheti.

Mutual suspicions between the Georgian population and government on the one hand, and Javakheti's Armenians on the other increased after the five-day war between Georgia and Russia over the breakaway region of South Ossetia in August 2008. The opinion of Javakheti's Armenians about the war was rather divided. The population of Javakheti have access to Georgian, Armenian and Russian television and were therefore presented with a range of opinions on the causes of the war. Initially, it would appear that the Russian version of events prevailed, as one of the main local television channels, ATV-12 in Akhalkalaki, which, along with Parvana TV in Ninotsminda, simultaneously translates Georgian news broadcasts into Armenian, had suspended broadcasting and only resumed its broadcasts on 12th August. For this reason, initial reports by mass media about the “genocide” of the Ossetian population at the hands of Georgian forces tended to be believed. However, according to the above-mentioned survey carried out by ECMI, 74% of non-Georgians in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda municipalities obtain access to news provided by local TV channels such as ATV-12—a similar proportion to those who access Armenian and Russian television news—and 18% access news provided by Adjara TV's Russian language broadcasts, which also provided the Georgian version of events. With time, therefore, as the local population was able to assimilate the often contradictory version of events, sympathies

began to shift towards the Georgian side. Interviews carried out by ECMI in Javakheti some two months after the war showed that the urban population seemed to be more critical of the Georgian government over the war than the rural population.

The aftermath of the war ushered in a more hard-line policy by the Georgian law enforcement agencies and the arrests of a number of high-profile Armenian activists, which caused a degree of resentment and fear amongst the politically active sector of society. Local observers also noted that the local state security services were much more active into probing suspected cases of disloyalty to the Georgian state. The draconian ten-year sentence handed down to Chakhalyan (see above) for doing little more than organizing protest actions must be seen in this context. Many Armenian activists see the imprisonment of Chakhalyan as politically motivated and some even see the activities of the Belarussian NGO ALAP as an exercise that was staged by the Georgian security services to test the loyalty of local Armenians. At the same time, many are critical of Minasyan and Akopjanyan for damaging Georgian-Armenian relations.⁶⁸

One issue that has virtually dropped off the agenda of local activists is that of the 62nd Divisional Russian military base, which was dismantled in 2007. Despite protests before the withdrawal of the base that its removal would deprive the population of a much needed source of income and would leave Javakheti open to Turkish aggression, the response after its withdrawal was remarkably muted. Other issues involving Georgia's relationship with Russia and the west have become more salient. The first is that of Georgia's membership of NATO, as some of Javakheti's Armenians fear that a NATO base manned with Turkish troops may be deployed in Akhalkalaki. A second is the construction of the new Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Baku (KATB) railway, which some local Armenian nationalists argue is a geopolitical project, the main aim of which is to isolate Armenia. There are also fears that Azeri and/or Turkish army units will be brought in to protect the railway and that guest workers will flood in from other parts of the country to help with the construction.

If dealt with responsibly, neither of these issues is likely to lead to divisions in the long term. The issue of Georgia's membership of NATO, while salient in 2007 and the first half of 2008, is likely to be placed on the back burner for a while as NATO is now unlikely to offer Georgia a Membership Action Plan (MAP) in the near future. Similarly if the construction of

⁶⁸ Interviews with the author.

KATB is managed well and jobs are provided for the local population in the construction, opposition to the plan is likely to fade away. Many leading Armenians are already supportive of the plan; the *gamgebeli* of Akhalkalaki and former United Javakh supporter Nair Iritsyan himself travelled to Kars and met local dignitaries to discuss plans for cross-border co-operation with Turkey when he was mayor of Akhalkalaki in 2005. Many local residents were encouraged by promises by the administration of the KATB project that 70-75% of those employed in the construction of the railway will be local residents, although others remained rather more sceptical.

The final set of concerns that exercise the minds of the local population are economic concerns. Indeed these concerns are considered more important than political issues for the rural population. Above all they relate to the continuing difficulty in making a living in Javakheti without sending a family member to Russia for seasonal work. Rural Armenians still rely primarily on subsistence agriculture in order to live and the market in Georgia for agricultural products from Javakheti, especially potatoes, is weak given the inflow of imported potatoes from Turkey, which makes it difficult for local producers to sell their potatoes in other parts of Georgia. Despite earlier promises that the Georgian armed forces would buy their potatoes from Javakheti after the withdrawal of the Russian military base, in 2008 it was reported that the Georgian army was importing potatoes from Turkey, although army procurement officers returned to Akhalkalaki in February 2009, once again proposing to buy potatoes. Some sources report that the government has intervened to reduce the imports of potatoes from Turkey in response to a request by Nair Iritsyan, although it is not clear whether such a move would be feasible.⁶⁹ Another major problem facing rural communities is a shortage of firewood, which is essential in Javakheti's harsh winters. Although the local population were given firewood vouchers after a promise made during the presidential election campaign during the winter of 2007-08, these vouchers proved useless as it was almost impossible to exchange them for firewood. Many local residents therefore thought that the provision of the vouchers was no more than an election ploy.

The Azeris of Kvemo Kartli

If political demands take centre stage amongst the active sector of the population in Javakheti, economic demands predominate in Kvemo Kartli. The issue of access to land has

⁶⁹ Source: interviews with the author.

been at the top of the agenda over recent years and despite some improvements in land distribution (see above), it remains a major concern for a large part of the Azeri population. Sub-letting of land to the local population at a profit by local *latifundistas* remains a problem and keeps some rural inhabitants close to the poverty line. Another major economic issue is that of the Sadakhlo bazaar, a market on the border with Armenia (and also close to the border with Azerbaijan) at which local Azeris used to trade before it was closed down in an anti-smuggling crackdown in December 2005. Stricter customs regulations also led to the closure of the Red Bridge market, just on the Azeri side of the border, in 2006. These two markets were a major source of income for much of the local population, especially Azeris (International Crisis Group 2006). Azeri activists complain that the Azeri population has been disproportionately targeted by the Georgian government's anti-corruption campaign and have been campaigning to reopen the Sadakhlo bazaar. In particular, they complain that Azeri residents in Kvemo Kartli are often forbidden to sell agricultural produce in the street, despite the fact that this practice is commonplace elsewhere in Georgia.⁷⁰

Another major problem for Kvemo Kartli's Azeri population is high unemployment. Although precise figures are not available, probably a majority of this population group is unemployed. In part this is a problem that affects all rural regions of Georgia, the recent economic boom (now over) that affected the capital, Tbilisi, left most rural districts of Georgia untouched. Amongst Kvemo Kartli's Azeris, however, the unemployment situation is particularly bad because of the few opportunities Azeris have to work for state structures, given the predominance of Georgian personnel, and because of the closure of markets such as Sadakhlo, where local Azeris used to trade. As in Javakheti, the lack of opportunities for young people has caused many to emigrate either to Baku or to Russia.

Overall, the information vacuum is probably one of the biggest problems for Kvemo Kartli's Azeri population. One NGO leader in Marneuli complained that he has to travel to Tbilisi to find out what is going on in his own town.⁷¹ In comparison with the rest of Georgia—and even with Javakheti—local Azeris have access to far fewer sources of news than their counterparts elsewhere. According to the ECMI survey quoted above, the non-Georgian

⁷⁰ "Tolerance" Public Association for Human Rights Protection, Appendix to the alternative NGO report "On the implementation by Georgia of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in the region of Kvemo Kartli" at http://tolerance.org.ge/en/monitoring_reports/files/appendix_FCNM_eng.pdf.

⁷¹ Interview with the author.

population of Gardabani, Marneuli, and Dmanisi municipalities obtain access to news from an average of 0.95 domestic channels, compared with an average of 1.6 in Javakheti,⁷² despite the fact that being closer to Tbilisi, Kvemo Kartli can receive more Georgian channels. Only 3.5% of non-Georgians in these three municipalities obtain news from local television channels, compared with 74% in Javakheti (see above). This is due to the dearth of local television channels in Kvemo Kartli that operate in the Azeri language; only the Bolnisi-based TV company “Channel 12” carries out a similar role to the local TV stations ATV-12 and Parvana in Javakheti by broadcasting Georgian news in the Azeri language, and its news coverage in Azeri appears to be limited to a weekly information programme.⁷³ This lack of information on all issues of vital importance has led to a lack of awareness on matters of politics and governance, as is demonstrated by the survey finding (above) that most non-Georgians do not even know what parties or blocs are standing in parliamentary elections.

It is sometimes argued that Kvemo Kartli is less politically volatile than Javakheti because the Azeri population, being less well-informed about events, is less assertive in terms of articulating demands of a political nature. While this may be true, the lack of institutionalized channels through which the population can aggregate and articulate its interests may make spontaneous demonstrations of protest more, rather than less, likely. In 2004 and 2005, a number of spontaneous protests over land distribution turned violent (see above), including the above-mentioned incident in which an elderly Azeri woman died (International Crisis Group 2006).

The sense of isolation in Kvemo Kartli is particularly acute because there is often a lack of communication between the local authorities and the population. As the local power structures are dominated by Georgians (even in those municipalities in which Azeris make up an absolute majority) the language barrier often makes it difficult for local people to understand how the local administration works or to influence the way their municipality is run. Although Russian is generally used as a language of communication, often neither local residents nor the Georgian administrators speak and write Russian fluently and the local authorities often demand that written applications are filed in Georgian. In this respect the situation is more acute than in Javakheti, where the officials that local residents deal with on an everyday basis speak the same language.

⁷² Significant at the 0.001 level of significance, using both Levene's test for equality of variances and the t-test for equality of means.

⁷³ See the company's website at <http://tv12.ge/eng/programmes.html>.

In political terms, the main demand of Azeri activists is for real representation in local state structures, which—as mentioned above—is more or less completely lacking at the present moment. Few Azeri activists call for full political autonomy of Azeri-speaking regions; the most radical step, supported by the NAAG, is to grant the Azeri language official status in Georgia. More mainstream groups such as the Congress of Georgian Azeris seek merely to promote the integration of the Azeri-speaking population into Georgian society and demand that the government take meaningful steps to facilitate this process, such as encouraging local Azeris to learn Georgian and work in the public sector. While in Javakheti local Armenians have been divided over the question of whether or not they need to learn Georgian, most Azeris would like to learn the state language but complain that they have too few opportunities to do so. The desire of Azeris to learn Georgian is especially strong because Kvemo Kartli is geographically very close to the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, and it would be far easier for the local population to travel to Tbilisi to work and study, rather than to faraway Baku.

On cultural matters, one issue of great importance for the local intelligentsia is that of village toponyms. In the beginning of the 1990s a large number of villages that had previously been referred to using Azeri toponyms were renamed using Georgian toponyms. This occurred during the Gamsakhurdia period, when Georgian nationalist discourse was at its zenith. The public association Mtredi, a local NGO, has identified 31 villages in Bolnisi municipality the names of which were Georgianized during this period.⁷⁴ Despite a number of appeals from local initiative groups to restore the old Azeri toponyms, no action has been taken by the government. This would appear to go against the spirit of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), which entered into force in 2006. Article 11.3 of the FCNM states that “the Parties shall endeavour ... to display traditional local names, street names and other topographical indications intended for the public also in the minority language when there is a sufficient demand for such indications.”

A final issue mentioned by Azeris in Bolnisi municipality is the alleged practice of erecting Christian crosses in Azeri villages. In late 2008, Azeri news sources reported that crosses had been erected in two villages in Bolnisi municipality on the initiative of the Georgian

⁷⁴ Public Association Mtredi, "Renewal of toponymy as one of the real steps on reinstatement of interethnic dialog in Kvemo-Kartli region in Georgia" at http://www.minelres.lv/reports/georgia/PublicAssociationMtredi_Georgia_jan09_en.doc.

Patriarchy: Chapala (or Gonchulu in Azeri) and Kvemo Bolnisi (Kyapyanyakchi), but that the authorities had promised that such practices would not be repeated and the crosses were later taken down.⁷⁵ However, in April 2009, local activists reported that a cross had also been erected in another Azeri village in the presence of local officials.⁷⁶ They stressed that the Christian cross was a revered symbol for the moderate Muslims of Kvemo Kartli, but were aggrieved at what they felt was a deliberate attempt to provoke Muslim sensibilities.

8. Conclusion

The process of integrating Georgia's national minorities into Georgian society gained new momentum in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution in late 2003. By looking closely into the dynamics of state society relations in the regions in which the two most numerous national minorities—the Armenian and the Azeri minorities—are concentrated we can see that the integration process has had both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, the government has made a real effort to end the isolation of geographically concentrated minority communities, both by taking positive steps to improve the infrastructure—a case in point is the rehabilitation of roads and school buildings in Javakheti—and by making a genuine effort to improve proficiency in the Georgian language amongst remote minority communities. On the other hand, the government has done little to overcome the predominantly authoritarian dynamic that defines state-society relations in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti and has failed to introduce real methods of participatory democracy. In Javakheti, the government continues the policy of the Shevardnadze administration of co-opting wealthy and influential members of the Armenian community to administer the region and supports efforts by this elite to undermine all public movements that threaten its continued hegemony. In Kvemo Kartli, the local Azeri community remains virtually unrepresented in local power structure.

Given the complicated relationship with Russia, the Georgian government is rightly concerned that circles closely connected with the Russian government may exploit existing ethnic divisions to further undermine the territorial integrity of Georgia. In the aftermath of the August 2008 war between Georgia and Russia it is not surprising that these potential

⁷⁵ Association for Civil Society Development in Azerbaijan News Portal, "Placing of crosses in Azerbaijani villages of Georgia suspended" (4 February 2009) at <http://avciya.az/eng/2009/02/04/placing-of-crosses-in-azerbaijani.html>.

⁷⁶ Interviews with the author.

threats are taken seriously. However, the tendency to treat any grassroots movement organized by members of national minorities with suspicion may be counterproductive as it may encourage hitherto more moderate groups to adopt a radical stance. Similarly, while the increased presence of the state security forces in regions such as Tsalka in which the lack of state regulation earlier exacerbated conflict may be timely, in other regions the dominance of structures of law enforcement and state security may provoke fear and suspicion amongst minority communities.

In the long run, minority communities will be encouraged to integrate into Georgian public life if there are real incentives to learn the state language and to continue to live and work in Georgia. This requires a sensitive approach that tackles a number of issues at the same time. First there is a need to provide effective and well-organized training in the Georgian language that adopts the most effective methodologies and operates in a realistic time frame. Second, it requires an education policy that encourages the most capable young people to remain in the country and study in Georgian institutions of higher education. Third it requires an economic policy that creates genuine job opportunities beyond the capital city that will benefit both rural Georgians and members of national minorities alike. Finally, it requires the establishment of genuinely democratic procedures at local level that allow members of national minorities to participate in the way they are governed. Recent efforts by the Georgian government to improve instruction in Georgian, to improve the rural infrastructure and to reform local self-government are welcome, but further steps in this direction need to be taken.

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